
Big Chicken

A NOVELLA BY DAVID RAY SKINNER





Preface

For as long as I can remember, my friends and relatives have told me that my life reads like a book, and that I should write it all down and publish it. “Things happen to you that don’t happen to normal people,” my sister told me. In the South, we call that a back-handed compliment.

With that in mind, the story you are (hopefully) about to read is true; it’s just that the facts and characters have all been changed to protect the guilty (more so than the innocent). Actually, some of the characters have been totally fabricated; others have been based on various friends and composites of friends and acquaintances. Likewise, some of the dialog is totally contrived, and some of it is word-for-word verbatim. When I originally started writing “Big Chicken,” I initially wrote it just as it had really happened. However, even though that first pass was factual, it read as fiction. So, I just decided to kick out the jams, and let the story loose, just to see where it would end up. Fictionalizing it would also protect some of the characters who have gone on to lead dignified lives, and possibly preserve some long-held friendships.

Obviously, there really is a Gatlinburg, New York City and Nashville, but also, there really was a big chicken, in the flesh (and feathers).

In fact, most of the descriptions of him in this story are pretty accurate, and in some cases, are even downplayed.

Ground zero of the story occurred at my summer job between my junior and senior year in college in the early '70s. The setting was a Nashville theme park where I drew caricatures alongside a cast of colorful, larger-than-life characters. The experiences and adventures that resulted from this launching pad changed the trajectory of my life and career. To this day, I look back on those events with fondness and amusement, and I've tried to slather this story with the spirit of those carefree, *if crazy*, moments.

Now that I'm older, I've come to grips with the notion that life is often a series of overlapping ripples in time; consequently, "Big Chicken" actually begins at the chronological end of the story and forces you back over the waves to swim against the current and through the zany chain of events. My intent was to hopefully let you off, safe and sound, at the end of the ride and leave you with a yearning to get back on for another spin.

David Ray Skinner

October 2014



The Texaco Star

“I’ve been blinded three times in my life,” he said to me, totally unprovoked and for no apparent reason. Actually, at that juncture in my life—it was the second summer of my thirties—I had gotten to the point where nothing surprised me anymore. By then, I was used to unusual comedies and dramas unfolding in front of me and drawing me into the scene. So, it seemed only natural that this stranger began to confide in me as if I were some kind of benevolent narrator-priest.

As he started talking, I imagined that we were just two obscure and unknown actors in a low-budget movie that no one would ever see, and this character had just delivered his first line.

“Tell me about the first time,” I said coolly, as if on cue. We were sitting in rusty-red folding chairs by a Tastee-Snak machine inside the waiting room of a Texaco station on Interstate 40, just outside Knoxville. On

the other side of the door, in the garage area, my father was sticking his head under the hood of my wounded 22-year-old Buick, gesturing and talking in that foreign language of machines to the Texaco mechanic. Dragging helplessly behind the disabled car was the sad little U-Haul trailer we had rented the previous morning in downtown Brooklyn.

Dad was an expert at diagnosing automotive ills, and over the years, I had become pretty good at sitting uselessly in gas station waiting rooms. So, I welcomed the stranger's strange interjection into my afternoon. I figured any kind of conversation would have been better than thumbing through the Texaco's yellowed copies of *Popular Mechanics*.

"It was 1947, right after the war," the guy said, closing his eyes to concentrate. He was an older man, and he was wearing a one-piece, pigeon-grey mechanic's jumpsuit with a little gold anchor on the pocket. He wore a pair of old, thick-lensed glasses, and he was bald on top, and the hedges of hair on the sides gave his head the appearance of a large, hairy egg.

"I was just out of the army, and had got me a job at the Maryville movie theater running the projector," he said, parsing every word as if he was delivering a precious oral history of a forgotten time. "I was running a Saturday night western—it was about some stranded pioneers, and they was fighting off some Indians. Indians ever-where...in the trees, over the hills and under the wagons. It was the first night we run it and, to tell you the truth, I was fascinated by them brave pioneers. An' I was standing right next to the projector, looking out the little booth window at the screen and them arrows was a-flying. Some of the pioneer men had arrows stickin' in 'em and they's women was helping them, loading they's rifles. An' the babies, they was a-cryin'. An' the Indians jus' kept a-comin'. Anyways, I was all caught up in what was happenin' on that Maryville movie screen, standing flat dab flush with the dang projector when the dad-blamed light bulb blew. For a second there, I thought the Indians set off an A-bomb, 'cause ever-thing went white and then went black. I was lyin' on the projector booth floor thinkin', '*How on earth did those Indians get the A-bomb, and how did they manage to blow me up all the way up here in the pro-jection booth?*' But it was all dark and the people, they was all a-

runnin' ever-where and the manager found me down on the floor and called the am-balance. They took me out on a stretcher, and I was blind for three days."

"Was there a lot of glass in your eye?" I asked, at this point, genuinely interested at the flukiness of his reflection of the event.

"No glass," he said, slowly shaking his head, "No glass anywhere. It was big shards of raw projector light that done it. Guess I got a little too close to the projector. They put me on that stretcher and took me home to Mama, and she made up some patches for my eyes and put me in the guest room. That room was always dark, you know, 'cause it was at the back of the house facing old man Gurney's field. He used to raise corn in it, till he got too sick. Anyway, I gots my eyesight back in a couple of days, but I never went back to that blamed movie theater. Never saw what happened to the pioneers, neither." The man hesitated briefly as if to mentally chew on that reflection. "Do you know?"

"Uh..." I said. That question wasn't in the script and threw me off a little.

"Well, sir. I will tell you this..." he said before I could answer, "After my theater blindness, it gave me the creeps just to drive by that Maryville movie house. But... they finally shut it down, you know. Now, it's a furniture store, and it don't bother me none. The *spell...the spell* was broken by sofas and easy chairs!"

The old man paused for effect and to make sure the story was making its intended impact.

"And you were blinded two other times?" I asked, back on cue, looking around to see if anyone else was hearing the dialogue.

"Yes sir," he said. He seemed pleased (and a little surprised) that I had been paying attention. "The second time I got blind was in 1966. They had just finished that piece of the interstate up there, and I was just driving down the road, havin' a good time. You know, it wadn't open to the public...ever-one was still taking old 70 up to Nashville. And this was a straightaway, son. But, like some dad-blamed fool, I had my window down with my arm out...this one, with the Hawaii tattoo." He held up a forearm branded with a sad and wrinkled hula girl in a hairy grass skirt.

“It came in the driver-side window—*pachang!*—and went here and across here.” He drew a line with his finger just under his eyebrows from his left eye over to his right eye. “And it all went black. I was blind! Toe-ta-lee blind! Again! To this day I don’t know how I got my car stopped. And it was a big car, too. Big ol’ blue Pontiac. Bigger than your Buick, even. Bought it used in Sweetwater. It’s a miracle I managed to get that ol’ Pontiac stopped. ’Course they weren’t any traffic. They hadn’t opened up they’s interstate, yet. But theys found me. Theys found me at the side of the road, crying like a little ol’ baby.”

“Good grief,” I said, “Somebody shot you? The bullet, the bullet grazed both your eyes?”

“Weren’t no bullet,” he said solemnly, throwing me a steely glance and shaking his head.

“Then, what—?”

“They say it was some kind of bug.”

“Some kind of bug?”

He nodded his shiny head slowly. “The doctors told me. They say they found insect feet all over the side of my face.”

He then quickly pulled a quarter out of one of his jumpsuit’s pockets and said, “I can make this come up tails. Watch. Tails, I tell you about the third time; heads you tell me if you ever got blinded.”

As the coin spun in mid-air, the door of the Texaco waiting room flew open with my father at the knob. “Danny, load up, we’re done. The Buick’s got itself a new thermostat,” he said as the stranger’s coin pinged down and rolled across the waiting room floor. Dad looked tired, but happy.

“So, we’re back on schedule,” he said, “In fact, if you want, we could even swing by your old farmhouse and see Hawkins. Maybe even pet the big chicken, if it’s still around.”

I really couldn’t tell if my dad was serious. It was hard to read his face, and we were both tired. We’d been driving straight for over 24 hours, just stopping for gas,

food, and well, a thermostat. And besides, the farmhouse was a good hour out of the way, and its long dirt driveway would have finished off the underside of the hapless Buick, not to mention the poor Brooklyn U-Haul trailer. And, even in the event that Hawkins was still at the farm, the big chicken was definitely *not* there.



The big chicken had not been around for a long time, but my dad had no way of knowing that. He just knew what an interesting item the big white bird had been. However, I had been living up north for seven years or so, and the cast of characters at the farmhouse had changed. And for that matter, although Dad had seen the rooster in person, I certainly don't remember him petting it—if that had even been possible.

In fact, the big chicken definitely hadn't been a pet, by any stretch of the imagination. He had been more like a wild animal that hung around the farmhouse—more like a feathered Gentle Ben or Flipper, but Gentle Ben and Flipper had not been vindictive and evil; had they been, they wouldn't have been made famous by 1960's TV shows, so that comparison self-destructs on its own. That being said, as strange as it may seem, the big chicken had been larger than life. His legacy had worked its way into the very fabric of my own personal history, as well as my tenure in New York.

And it was, in fact, New York from which my father was helping me escape, but that process had been slightly delayed by the mechanical idiosyncrasies of my stubborn old Buick. I grudgingly had to admit that, try as I might, I could not seem to close out the New York chapter of my life; the path had momentarily meandered into the waiting room of that East Tennessee Texaco, which was occupied by my father, myself, the mechanic (who was adding up the charges to restore the great Buick to its proper place on Interstate 40), and of course, the thrice-blinded local sage who was on his hands and knees searching for his tails-up quarter. It was like there was always one... more... page before the chapter could be finished. A Brooklyn meter maid had even ticketed the Buick out in front of my apart-

ment—*while we were loading the U-Haul*. It was like the city was saying, “Oh, just one more thing...we’re going to need you to leave a few pints of blood before you leave, along with your fingerprints and some locks of your hair. And, by the way, we’ll take some oil and paint scrapings from your Buick friend, as well.”



That Cheatin' Baby Will Cry For You

Now, before you jump to conclusions, you need to know that I hadn't always been the burned-out, broken-auto'd, desperate refugee from the big city that I was portraying that hot afternoon. I'd spent my so-called formative years a few hundred miles up the interstate from that old Texaco, even though (as in ol' Blindy III's story) that was before the interstate was built. I was born on a melting hot summer Saturday evening in a sleepy old hospital in downtown Nashville, a few blocks from the Ryman Auditorium, "Home of the Grand Ole Opry." In fact, the way my dad always told it, the Opry was in full bloom that night and the legendary Hank Williams was performing. And, because it was before Nashville had discovered air-conditioning, the windows in the hospital's nursery were thrown wide open, as were the windows in the Ryman. Our family legend was that they were recording Hank's performance that night, and, on that old 78 RPM,

if you listen really closely after his second song of his second set, above the noise of the fans (and Hank's fans, as well), you can faintly hear the protesting screams of the newborn Danny Ron Shortt, wafting across the hot Nashville night. (Incidentally, the background vocals were *not* discernable on the track when it appeared on the 45's, 33's, 8-tracks, cassettes, CD's and MP3's in the years to come.)

Truth be told, at that point, I wasn't Danny Ron, quite yet; I was "Baby Boy Shortt," which I now realize was a redundancy in terms. My parents had been adamant about giving me a biblical name, but at the same time, my Uncle Ronald was home on leave from the Korean War, and they wanted to honor him in some way, hence my eventual moniker of Daniel Ronald. They simply used the tried-and-true tradition of cooking up a good ol' Southern name by combining an Old Testament figure with a beloved family member, who just happened to be fighting a war for America. I feel like I got off lucky. They could have picked "Moses" and my Uncle Lon. Fortunately for me, Uncle Lon got a dishonorable discharge from the Coast Guard, so that knocked him out of the running. That at least saved me from being "Moses Lon Shortt," which would forever make my name sound like a landscaping tip for anyone that mows his lawn short.

As for my duo with Hank Williams, my alleged background vocal performance as a newborn was a source of pride for me for most of my youth. I wrote themes and essays about it in elementary school, and it even inspired me to pick up the guitar and start singing. After all, as I would tell my friends and elementary school classmates, my career had literally begun at the age of one day. I didn't mention it so much in my high school years, because in my secondary school circle of peers, ol' Hank had long been dethroned as a cool celebrity by those four nutty mop-tops from Liverpool. By then, I had also traded in my Hank guitar for a John-Paul-George Silvertone from the Sears catalog and had started a garage band called "The Dandy Lions." We mostly played swim parties and YMCA events—anything that could be driven to by our drummer's mother, who had a big Oldsmobile stationwagon.

We disbanded after one particularly disheartening gig at a kindergarten, where the teacher overseeing the event insisted that we accompany their musical chairs activity, stopping the music arbitrarily, so that the little darlings could fight over the

dwindling number of seats. We hadn't practiced this particular exercise, so when the three of us stopped and our drummer kept going, there was bedlam and confusion among the children. Fortunately, the little girl's arm was not broken, and the little boy's lower lip only required two stitches. Still, it was "The Dandy Lions" that received the brunt of the criticism from the teacher, parents and young patrons. If you've ever been booed by a gaggle of five-year-olds, you know that those emotional scars can last a lifetime.

Needless to say, it was somewhat comforting to return to my country roots once I got to college, and I dusted off my old Hank Williams 78 RPM record with my background vocals; it served as a shining beacon of credibility as I went about honing my country chops. That was until one of my fateful coffeehouse performances when I relayed the story of my Hank connection as between-song banter. I was promptly informed by a bespeckled, country-folk-and-western musicology major know-it-all in the front row that "logically and acoustically, it was 99.9% impossible that the baby's cry on the recording could have come from *outside* the Ryman." I then realized—*too late*—that I shouldn't have performed my "*Girls and Their Spectacles*" song that particular evening. Apparently, she had been seething through the remainder of my set.

"Your elementary teachers must have obviously had a great laugh at your expense," she said, sending a rolling chuckle through the audience.

"I got A's on the papers," I told her, smiling and desperately grasping at some sense of face-saving.

"Hmmm," she said, crossing her arms, "That's odd—there is no 'A' in 'truth,' and in your case, it also doesn't apply to '*authenticity*.' Here's an idea for ya, though...why don't you stop your music *arbitrarily*," she asked derisively, "So we can all scramble for our chairs?"

I later found out that her younger brother, who by that time was in elementary school, had a small, pale scar on his lower lip.



Like a Hawk, ETC

The little Christian school that I had attended, East Tennessee College (ETC), was only thirty or forty miles away from the Texaco station that my dad and I were pulling away from, and though it had only been a little over ten years since I had graduated, it may have well as been an ice age away—there had been so much frozen water under the bridge since those days. ETC turned me from a fairly conservative Baptist boy into a long-haired pseudo hippie. In all fairness, some of that transition had been accelerated by my summer job at a popular theme park in Nashville between my junior and senior year. It was at that theme park where I met my future farm-mate, Hawkins and where we drew caricatures of the theme park's visitors. Actually, the theme park called them caricatures; we called them whacked-out cartoon depictions of the inner souls of tourists (we

also referred to the process as drawing—and then biting—the hand that feeds you).

After work, we'd throw our guitars and banjos in the car, drive out to the country, and play bluegrass until the wee hours of the morning. The next day (or actually, *later that same day*), we'd do it all again. Even though it was just a summer job for me, I made more money (and played more bluegrass) than I had the previous three summers combined. Of course, the previous summers, I'd flipped burgers and pumped gas, and the only thing I drew working those jobs were insults, complaints and nasty remarks.

Being a caricature artist opened the door to meeting all sorts of interesting people, but none was more interesting, entertaining and talented than the Hawk. He was the original cosmic Zen hillbilly with a little bit of mischief thrown in for good measure. He often wore his long dark hair in Indian braids and even occasionally passed himself off as full-blooded Cherokee. What's more, he would sometimes speak in broken English around strangers and fix them with an icy glare to hammer home whatever point he was attempting to make. In actuality, he was descended from at least five generations of competent middle-class bookkeepers, which, much to the chagrin of his poor father and grandfather, came to a clamoring halt with the Hawk. But, this was not to say that he wasn't enterprising. He had successfully eluded the theme park's hair code by cleverly concealing his braids underneath a smart, blonde, flat-top wig. Only the most astute of his subjects could spot and point out the tell-tale sprigs of black hair beneath the wig. Hawkins would then explain to these eagle-eyed detectives that he had a terminal head-and-hair disease, and he claimed the wig contained it and kept it from spreading. This explanation usually sent these potential whistleblowers quickly scurrying along to the log flume or mine disaster ride.

The following Spring, a few weeks before my college graduation at ETC, the Hawk showed up unexpectedly in full costume at my off-campus flophouse. Hornmacher, one of my flophousemates, was suitably freaked out when Hawkins appeared at the back door in his feathers and leathers.

"*What the—?*" I heard Hornmacher exclaim. He was in the kitchen cooking up some Hamburger Helper when Hawkins appeared at the door, his Indian silhou-

ette projecting through the door's frosted-glass windowpane. I had come to accept that any "*What the—?*" exclaimed in our old off-campus house would somehow inevitably be traced to me. So, I calmly closed my Sociology book (which I was combing through to cram for the upcoming final) and casually meandered downstairs.

"What took you so long?" I asked the Hawk as I ushered him into the little kitchen, even though in actuality, I was very surprised to see him. Behind us, Hornmacher's hamburger meat sizzled on the stove's electric eye, but he had skedaddled.

"Couldn't remember what Christian college you went to, Shortty Shortt," he grinned. "This is the third one in East Tennessee I've been to. The last one had me juggling snakes. Fortunately, once I got here, everybody I asked knew where you lived. Dude, there's some strange people here. I met some crazy chick a couple of blocks from here that asked me to ask you if you were still 'deceiving your audiences by pretending to sing with Hank Williams.' Wow, dude. And then your buddy refuses to open the back door and runs out of here like a scalded dog. Again, wow, dude."

"Yeah, that's Hornmacher. He's shy."

"Yeah?"

"Okay...he's shy *and* he's afraid of Indians. He comes from solid, pioneer stock, and some of them took a few arrows for the cause. He claims that some of 'em were even portrayed in a movie a few years back." I glanced out the window and there was only a quickly-dissipating cloud of dust in the house's back parking lot where Hornmacher's car had been only minutes before.

"Uh...how about some Hamburger Helper? I think Hornmacher donated some dinner," I said.

"Is it vegetarian?" he asked.

"Sure, it is," I said, stirring the browning hamburger meat.

"Oo, vegetarian. I usually don't touch the stuff, but this is a special occasion."

“And that special occasion is...?”

“Plotting our future, my Shortt friend,” Hawkins said. “Don’t even think about going back to Nashville to draw pictures. Our talents are wasted there. *We need to take our show on the road.* And not just the *drawing* show. We are Renaissance men, remember.”

“More like Medieval boys,” I said, glopping the Hamburger Helper onto a couple of paper plates.

“Gee-e-e-e-e-e-burg is the place to be. Farm living is the life for thee,” Hawkins sang.

The “G-burg” was Gatlinburg, a little tourist town at the edge of The Great Smoky Mountains National Park. My only thoughts of it were from my childhood, and they weren’t exactly pleasant memories. My family had rented a cabin there when I was nine or ten, and all I remember about it was begging my parents to buy me a “Gin-you-wine Hillbilly Corncob Pipe” from one of the tourist shops on the main drag. Don’t ask me why. My dad was a Camel smoker back in those days, and I didn’t even know any pipe smokers—or hillbillies, for that matter. What I *do* know is that a week or two after we got back home to suburban Nashville, I snuck off one afternoon to the woods behind our house with a book of matches from that tourist shop, along with my precious corncob pipe. I filled the little cobby bowl with leaves I found in the woods and lit that sucker up. Ten minutes later, I was throwing up from one end of the woods to the other, and pieces of semi-digested baloney and cheese sandwiches draped the foliage and glistened in the late-summer afternoon sunlight. Somewhere along the line, I dropped the corncob pipe, and by the time I got home to the comfort of our little bathroom, the woods were already up in flames. My parents had to wait until my stomach had recovered before sending me out to choose a switch for my woods-burning punishment.

So, even though Gatlinburg was less than an hour from my college, the thought of settling down there after graduation never crossed my mind. All I could think about were corncob pipes and burning forests. Hawk, however, made it sound like a grand adventure.

“It’s perfect,” he said, “We can further expand our talents and plans of exploiting out-of-towners. *How?*” you may ask. *Simple.* By day, we’ll be semi-famous caricature artists—I’m thinking \$10 a pic—and at night, we’ll be a semi-famous bluegrass band working for drinks and tips. So...Shorttso, what are we waitin’ on? Let’s do it!”

“I do need to graduate first,” I said.

“If you must,” he said, scraping the edges of his plate with his fork. “Got any more of that Hornmacher Helper?”



This Bud's For You

A few days after graduation, I was back in Nashville, and our *Mountain Invasion* plan began to take shape. I loaded up my four-door black Falcon (which we called The Black Falcon) with my instruments, clothes, and art table and supplies and swung by and picked up Hawkins. We then loaded up his instruments, clothes and art table and supplies, and pointed the Black Falcon toward the East Tennessee. It was exciting, because we both knew that it was the start of a new, *off-the-beaten interstate* adventure.

We made Gatlinburg by nightfall, and the little village was just starting to come to life with its twinkling lights along the river that ran through town. Our first stop was the local watering hole, a quaint little riverside bar called “The Local Watering Hole.” We scoped out the lay of the land and found a table down in front of the band. The guitar player up on the stage nodded at us as if he sensed kindred spirits—or maybe it was be-

cause Hawkins dropped several of his metal finger picks as he pulled out some wrinkled bills to pay for the pitcher of beer.

After the last set, we asked a few of the locals at the bar if they knew of a house we could rent, and a couple of the coherent ones told us we could probably find a place in the valley, just over the mountain from Gatlinburg. So the next morning, we proceeded to the valley looking for an inexpensive house to rent. What we had in mind was some sort of farmhouse, so that our Nashville musician friends could have a rustic getaway when they wanted to rough it in the mountains. It really didn't occur to us that that meant *we* would be roughing it *all* the time.

We pulled into the valley gas station (called "The Valley Gas Station"), and the woman inside running the cash register told us about Ol' Bud and said that he had an empty farmhouse. She said that he had inherited it or bought it from some of his relatives, and that he'd probably be willing to rent it out. She drew us a map to the farm on a used paper napkin, and marked the farmhouse with a squeezed-out dollop of mustard. She also warned us not to mess with his cows.

A half-hour later, we were nosing the Black Falcon into the farmhouse's long, dusty driveway. When we drove up into the yard, Ol' Bud was standing by the pump, which was halfway between the empty farmhouse and the abandoned chicken yard. He was clearly an old-time farmer, tall and seasoned by the wind and sun. He was wearing a checkered long-sleeve shirt, patented faded overalls and an old straw hat from which errant tufts of white hair nonchalantly poked out like patches of Tennessee cotton. He was also in the process of yelling incoherent commands at his big dumb cows as they marched single file through the tall grass. "Ho! Ha! Baroovus!" he yelled, totally ignoring us as we awkwardly climbed out of the car. The golden brown dust from the driveway slowly swirled around and above the Falcon and then lightly settled on the car's hood, roof and trunk as we cautiously approached the old farmer.

"I'm Mr. Hawkins, and this is Mr. Shortt," the Hawk finally said, trying to appear respectable, "Heard you had a house to rent."

Ol' Bud immediately saw through it, though. He put down his bucket, stared at something over our heads, and sighed. "Fifteen dollar a month, and stay away from my cows," he said tiredly, as if he went through this process on a regular basis. "Ho! Ha! Baroovus!" he shouted at his cows.

"It's refreshing to see a man that really loves his cows," Hawkins offered.

"Yeah, I love 'em alright...I love 'em all the way to the bank," Ol' Bud said, suddenly sizing the two of us up. "They're fat ol' greenbacks with horns. Ever time I butcher one, I go home to the wife with a smile on my face and a wad of bills in my pocket. That's exactly why I'm telling you to stay clear of 'em. They ain't pets, boys. I'll rent you the house alrighty, but if you go messin' with my greenbacks, you boys'll be gone before you can say 'jackrabbit.' Is that clear enough for you?"

"Crystal," Hawkins said, sheepishly, but with all of the dignity he could muster.



We moved into the farmhouse a few days later. We didn't need any furniture—some previous owners had left the kitchen table, sofa, and even bedframes and mattresses in the bedrooms. Also, on the day of our move-in, we inherited some token farm dogs, Freud and Hosepipe, to lie under the porch and bark at anyone who drove up the high-weed, quarter-of-a-mile dirt driveway.

The dogs' original owner, a potter named Walton that we met in The Local Watering Hole, lived in Gatlinburg, and he could no longer keep them in town. "They were born and destined to be out-in-the-country dogs, not town dogs," he told us, after hearing that we had found a farmhouse in the valley. "They need room to run around and not be stepped on by pedestrians or hit by bicycles."

"Wonder how they'll do with cows?" Hawkins asked.

"Oh, they typically get along with anybody and anything," Walton said. He had named them Blackie and Brownie, but actually, they were both brown. However, once we got them relocated to the farm, we decided to give them new

names—a fresh start, as it were. Blackie became Freud, because of his preoccupation with the ink blots on our abandoned caricature artboards on the back porch. Brownie’s new name came a few days later, after a gig we played one night at The Local Watering Hole. There was a table of drunk college students at the edge of the stage demanding that our makeshift band have a name. Upon our refusal to respond, they began throwing names around the room and wadded-up napkins at the stage.

“Hey,” said the lead drunk student (we’ll call him “Bob”). “How ’bout ‘The Beagles’?” he suggested. “You could even spell it with an ‘ea’ like ‘The Beatles’ spell their name...you could even name your dog that, too. Here, Beagle! Here, Beagle...”

“Oh, you’re silly,” his girlfriend said. “And drunk. These boys need something sophisticated-sounding like, uh, ‘The Playtoes’.”

“Yeah. So-fist-dinated,” said “Bob,” “...like how ’bout ‘The Hosepipes’? Plato had a hosepipe, din’ he? If not, how’d he water his famous garden?”

“That’s it!” screamed his girlfriend, “‘Plato’s Hosepipe’! ‘Bob!’ You’re a blithering genius!”

“I like it,” said the Hawk, “In fact, thanks for the suggestion...and, yes, we will even name our dog that, too, if you’ll just let us finish our set, and tip us. There’s a tip jar right here at the front of the stage.”

“Ain’t a jar,” said “Bob” belligerently, “It’s a...it’s a mug! A beer mug!” He picked up the mug and peered into it like a telescope.

“Okay,” said Hawkins as he fiddled with the high G-string of his banjo, “Let us finish our set and mug us, then.”

“Funny man. Funny person,” said “Bob,” leaning back on the back two legs of the rickety bar chair, “Only I got a great, great, good idea. How ’bout if in the middle of your song, when we least expect it—”

The last part of his request was drowned out by the crack of the chair’s leg and the subsequent sound of breaking glass as he pulled the table, half-filled pitcher

and his friends' empty and full mugs of beer over on top of him as he collapsed backward.

As Hawkins launched into the banjo intro of a bluegrass version of "Please Help Me, I'm Falling," he nonchalantly grinned at me and said, "Drunk or not, they gave us a great name for a band. And, it's an even better name for a dog."

So, Brownie magically morphed into Hosepipe. He was also called *Plato* by the Hawk when he was distracted or otherwise too disoriented to remember the exact excerpt of the name. To add to the confusion, the valley vet who took care of the dogs' shots always referred to Hosepipe as *Pluto*, not only because she was a huge Disney cartoon fanatic, but mainly because Hawkins had an annoying tendency to neglect to close the uppermost loop on his A's when writing in a hurry, and he was usually in some sort of a hurry whenever he dropped off the dogs. Looking back, I've often reflected that it's no wonder that poor Hosepipe harbored a perpetual identity crisis through most of his brief and luckless life.

In addition to our regular spot (Monday, Wednesday and Friday night) on The Local Watering Hole's stage, where we perfected our bluegrass ploy, we also found a home on the downtown sidewalk in front of the "Mountain Wax Figures Museum" during daylight hours to launch our caricature business. That was the summer of the "message t-shirt." Every other caricature we drew featured the client/subject/victim wearing a recently-purchased t-shirt from the wax museum or from one of the other adjoining shops.

The most popular shirt from the wax museum had a picture of the Pope shaking hands with a circa-1957 Elvis with the inscription: "My Parents Went to the 'Mountain Wax Figures Museum' and All I Got Was This Stupid T-Shirt." Next door to the Wax Museum was the "Great Big Clouds of Joy" Christian bookstore, and they also featured t-shirts that summer, most notably one that loudly announced: "My Grandparents Went to Heaven and All I Got Was This Stupid T-Shirt."

But our t-shirt caricatures were of little help to our struggling venture. Some people even complained that they were too surreal. That actually wasn't too far off the mark; we often referred to our artwork as *Salvador Dali Parton-esque* (Dolly

Parton had been raised in that very county). And as for our music, it was also a little too non-traditional—The Local Watering Hole’s owner sarcastically described it as *Jimi Hendrix-meets-Bill Monroe*. Consequently, it wasn’t a real shocker when we started having trouble raising the rent, albeit \$15 a month. That’s why, when the September rent was due, we started doing demolition work for Sgt. Francis, an eccentric ex-Marine turned militant vegetarian.



Time For Sergeants

“Mucus!” Sgt. Francis yelled above the heavy drone of his pickup, “Mucus is what does your body in, friend! Mucus will bring our government to its knees one of these days. That is, if it doesn't first topple the entire planet, at which time it will be a moot point.”

“Muke point,” mumbled Hawkins, but Sgt. Francis apparently didn't hear him over the drone of the pickup's engine.

We were returning home from a hard day of tearing down old houses in order to make way for an alleged scenic highway through the valley. It was a road that we hoped would never be built—we were afraid it would be an ugly concrete-and-asphalt scar through one of the most beautiful valleys in Tennessee—and we did feel some nagging pains of guilt about enabling the progress of the road. However, we did have to pay the rent,

after all. Along with the guilt, there was yet another annoying price to pay for the work—Sgt. Francis’s endless lectures, sermons and diatribes about the evils of mucus.

Hawkins was initially amused at the indoctrination, but by the end of the day, he began to focus on deflecting, distracting or whatever else he could do to change the subject. “What kind of engine do you have in this truck, Sgt. Francis? I mean, other than loud?” he asked, innocently, as if he really knew or cared about truck engines. We were all three crammed into the front seat. Sgt. Francis was wearing orange-lensed glasses and a one-piece, pea-green worksuit with a little gold anchor on the pocket, and he was sweating like a man about to die. He was also a man on a mission, and he would not be derailed by the Hawk’s feeble attempts at misdirection.

“Friend,” he said, ignoring Hawk’s question about his truck’s engine, “Look at crime. Look at black industrial smoke and dead fish pollution. Look at how a man mistreats his brother, and what do you see?”

“Stinky people?” answered the Hawk.

“Mucus, friend, *mucus!*” By this time, he had turned his pickup into the dusty tracks of our driveway. “Not just your *run-of-the-mill* mucus, but the kind that—” His voice stopped mid-sentence, and his muscular forefinger punched the windshield, “There’s...something ...*big*...goin’ down...in your...chicken yard!”

Sure enough, as the big pickup noisily threaded through the weeds at the top of the driveway, the dogs were barking like crazy, and there was a posse of farmers and some other friends of Ol’ Bud’s in the yard between the house and the chicken yard. They wore the excited expressions of a lynch mob as they stood in a circle beneath a headless cow hanging upside down from the top branch of the oak. The big limb creaked as what was left of the big cow’s black and white body twisted in the wind. Although I didn’t want to come right out and admit it, especially in front of Sgt. Francis, who was on the verge of slipping into shock, and Hawkins, who I knew would be amused enough about it to start making jokes about me and the cow, but I thought I recognized the old girl, even without her head. She was the one with the markings that resembled Europe and Asia etched

out in black against a white cowhide ocean. Even turned sideways and upside down and swinging in the mountain breeze, I could still make out the Italian boot toe almost kicking the Sicilian football.

The area below the *hanging cow tree* was framed on two sides by the pastures where Ol' Bud kept the rest of his 40-odd cows. And odd they were. They lined the fencerow four and five deep on both sides. They all stood stoically watching the farmers in silence, except for the lone bull that was bellowing his disapproval.

"Uh-oh," said the Hawk, "Looks like somebody's best girlfriend won a trip to Burgerville."

Ol' Bud stuck his head through the driver's window on the pickup, his jaw moving a full two seconds before the words appeared. "Whut's that dog's name?" Bud asked, pointing at Freud and totally ignoring the blanching Sgt. Francis.

"Freud," I said. Bud whirled around pitching some unrecognizable cow's organ to the dog.

"Here, Floyd," he said.

"Ol' Bud studied English in Tokyo," Hawkins said to no one in particular as we climbed out of the truck. We turned to thank Sgt. Francis for the work and for helping us earn enough to pay that month's rent, but all we saw were his taillights filtering through the dust down the driveway.

"Guess it was a little too much non-vegetarian reality for the good sergeant," Hawkins said as he watched Freud haul his prize under the porch. He fumbled through his pockets and found a half-eaten package of putter butter and crackers, and threw one to Hosepipe.

"Sorry it's not a cow organ, Hosey," he said, "Or piano, even. Sometimes life throws us crackers when the other guy gets the pancreas."

Sgt. Francis had paid us cash for our work, and we turned around and gave Bud our rent money for the month. Plus, there was some left over, and we figured we had just enough to do a session at a Nashville studio owned by Hawk's friend

and to pay for the gas to get us there and back. “It’s time we got serious about *Plato’s Hosepipe*,” Hawkins said.



The day after our demolition work, we loaded up the Black Falcon and headed over to Nashville, but when we arrived, the Hawk’s recording studio friend was nowhere to be found, and the whole building was boarded up and wrapped with bright yellow “*Crime Scene*” tape.

“I guess someone’s made their last hit,” Hawkins said. There was nothing to do but turn around and head back to the mountains. We had gotten a late start, so the sun was already sinking low over West Nashville.

“We can at least scrounge up a home-cooked meal before he hit the road,” he said. We loaded the instruments back into the trunk and headed over to the Hawk’s old neighborhood where he had grown up. There was nobody at home at the first two houses we visited, but at the third one, we hit paydirt. His old high school bandmate, Truckey was in the kitchen of the apartment discussing the evening meal with his wife, and they were excited to see Hawkins (with me in tow) at their front door, even if we were begging for a meal.

“It’ll cost you some songs,” said Truckey as he hugged the Hawk, “I’ll bet you boys got your axes in that little black car.”

So, after several servings of cornbread, beans, fried chicken and sweet tea, and a few rounds of “Fox on the Run,” “Footprints in the Snow,” and one of our latest original songs, “Fox’s Footprints on the Run in the Snow,” we left Truckey’s apartment around midnight and hit I-40, settling in for the long drive home.

The Black Falcon had rolled off the Ford assembly line in Detroit sometime in 1964. I always liked to think that it was built in the spring of that year, specifically on the day that the basketball team from the Nashville high school that I would eventually attend won the state championship. At any rate, the Falcon had been as-

sembled before the days of widespread FM, so its radio only got AM stations. At night, however, the little radio could pick up Clear Channel AM stations from all over the country, or at least all over the country east of the Mississippi. So, to relieve the monotony of the late night drive back to the farm, we spun the tuner dial back and forth between Opry highlights from Nashville, rock 'n' roll from Chicago and a call-in talk show from Atlanta. Around two or three in the morning, in the middle of nowhere and under an eerie, yellow full moon, we were listening to the Atlanta talk-show guy.

“We’ve got Buford on line three. You’re on the air,” he said to the caller, “What’s on your mind, Buford?”

“Do you believe in ghosts?” Buford asked.

“Okay, I’ll bite—*do I?*” the talk show guy smarmily asked. “I’m not sure, Boof. Aliens, yes. Witches, yes. Goblins, yes. Ghosts...hm-m-m-m, my own personal jury’s out on that. Why do you ask?”

“I work downtown, so every day, I see thousands of people walking by my little shop,” Buford said.

“That’s nice,” said Mr. Talk Show.

“...and about once a week I see my fourth-grade teacher out on the sidewalk across the street from the shop.”

“Maybe she got tired of wasting her time tryin’ to educate little urchins.”

“She passed away when I was in the sixth grade,” said Buford.

“Well, Mr. Buford, if you’re seeing your fourth-grade teacher on a regular basis, I’d say you’ve got more than a ghost problem,” the talk-show guy said petulantly.

Hawkins broke the silence inside the Black Falcon. “That *is* pretty strange,” he said, turning the radio’s volume down, “I’d hate to see the ghost of my fourth-grade teacher in the middle of the day. Or, at the end of the day, for that matter.”

“Of all the ghosts in the world,” I said, “Lincoln, Churchill, Washington, Socrates...it would be my luck to see my fourth-grade teacher, Mrs. Baltic.”

“Wow, I just had a weird thought,” Hawkins said seriously, “What if all of a sudden, Ol’ Bud appeared right here on the front seat between us and said, ‘I bet you boys didn’t know I died while you wuz gone!’”

I shivered and swallowed hard and pushed a little harder on the accelerator.

We got back to the farm at dawn, and when we drove up the driveway, we saw Sgt. Francis sitting on our front porch. The sun was just coming over the mountain to the east, and its golden rays painted the side of his face with broad, yellow stripes. We could tell that he’d been sitting there for quite a while. In his lap, he held a bag with a drawstring. The bag contained a young white rooster, which we promptly ushered to the viny confines of the empty chicken house. “You boys ought to think deeply about getting your lives together,” he said.

“Oh, yeah—” Hawkins said, “Ol’ Bud and the headless cow...”

The sergeant’s eyes narrowed. “Hawk, I know your people lived and thrived on buffalo and deer, but I gotta tell ya...it’s gonna take some doin’ to get over seeing what your farmer friends did to that innocent creature.”

“Dad-gummed mucus,” said the Hawk. Sgt. Francis nodded knowingly.



Tastes Like Chicken

We were pleased. We finally were just like old-time farmers. Not only did we have a farmhouse—with no electric heat and no inside bathroom or running water—we also had a couple of farm dogs for under the porch and a brand new rooster for the chicken house. And, then of course, there were cows! We couldn't touch them, but we could look at them all we wanted. And, we didn't even have to farm—we could just write songs about farming and play them in bars for drinks and tips. It was like we were secondary farmers, or farmers *once removed*.

A few days after Sgt. Francis gave us the chicken, the young bird had finally ventured out of the chicken house and was walking the grounds around the farmyard, surveying his new domain. Ever the watchful canine sentries, Freud and Hosepipe sprang into immediate action at the first

sighting of the feathered stranger. For the next few days, it was an oft-repeated scene out of a *Looney Tunes* cartoon with the chicken beating a hasty retreat, the dogs in hot pursuit.

By the end of the first week of the chicken's stay at the farm, he was beginning to actually resemble a cartoon rooster who had just sat on a bomb, because, although he had managed to stay one step ahead of the two dogs, they sometimes got close enough to grab a mouthful of tailfeathers. The resulting effect was one of a spunky young rooster with a bald spot around his butt. His bright white feathers ended at what would have been a beltline if a chicken had a waist; his hind-quarters looked like three days worth of bad beard stubble with a button of a stubby tail stuck in the middle.

I was tempted to intervene, but Hawkins stopped me and said, "They're all farm animals, and they need to work it out among themselves. We shouldn't get involved in the natural order of things. Besides, you should never underestimate a young rooster. I don't know if you know this, *but you can see the devil when you look into the eyes of a chicken.*"

However, the next thing we knew, the rooster was gone. Flown the coop, as it were. What's worse, Freud and Hosepipe had gotten a taste of chicken, or at least of chicken tailfeathers. Actually, I don't think it was so much the taste of blood or feathers as it was the pure *canine sport* of it all. There were no buses or mailmen, or even cars to chase in the valley where we were living, so I suppose if you were a valley dog, you had to grab all the gusto you could find where and if you could find it. And, I'm guessing that a *running-scared chicken* was a lot more fun for the dogs to chase than the slower moving pickups and tractors out on the main road.

This laissez faire attitude, however, was not shared by Ol' Bud and his circle of farmer friends, most of whom owned chickens, or should I say had chickens; *does anyone ever really own a chicken?* A few days after our particular de-tailed chicken disappeared, we woke one morning to discover a horrifying site. Actually, it wasn't exactly *War of the Worlds* horrifying; it was more like if Rod Serling directed one of the afore-mentioned *Looney Tunes* cartoons. There were a couple of dozen dead

chickens of various sizes and colors scattered across the yard in front of the house—it was sort of like a poultry version of *War of the Worlds*.

“Holy chickens!” said Hawkins when we first walked out onto the porch that morning. He’d already put the old percolator on the woodstove, and we were gearing up for the dusty ceremonial hike to the distant rusted mailbox. The chickens weren’t even eaten. They had no body parts missing. They just lay in the mountain morning sunshine, all moist and shiny from fresh dog spit.

Ol’ Bud showed up almost immediately. He slammed the door on his tuna-colored ’55 pickup, and we could see he was extremely irritated. “I knew it,” he said. “Old man Stempus called me this mornin’ and said dogs wuz killin’ his chickens and were they your dogs? I had a feelin’ as soon as I laid eyes on those dogs, they was chicken killers.

“They was also a little bit too anxious to eat the cow guts I threw ’em. At least, that one—Floyd,” he said, pointing at Freud. But once they taste the blood of a chicken, they gotta have it. Live chickens all the time. They’re like a couple-a dope fiends.”

“Gazooks, they’re chicken fiends,” said the Hawk.

“This ain’t one of your cityboy jokes!” said Bud, pointing his finger at Hawkins. “Let me put it like this: You boys got a problem. And ’cause I was fool enough to rent you this place, that makes it my problem, too. You boys better fix it, or I will.” He reached into his pickup truck and pulled out a vintage shotgun.

“Why in the world do you need two dogs around here, anyway? One dog will be fine. But two, especially of that breed—whatever it is—well, that’s a big problem. They got nothin’ to do but git inta trouble.”

He threw his shotgun up onto the seat of the truck and climbed in beside it. “Fix it, boys. This is your only warning.”

That afternoon we walked over to the next farm to talk to Darryl and to ask his advice. Since Darryl was our age and had lived in the valley all his life, he had become our liaison with the local community. He was also a musician and would oc-

asionally drive over and bring his guitar along with several of the valley boys. Darryl was familiar with the problem.

“Whoa! Not good. Not good,” he said. “The best thing to do is to go right back up to your yard right now and get the very worst, stinking, bloody chicken bodies and tie ’em around the dogs’ necks. Oo, they hate that.”

We loped on back to the farmhouse, found some rope and caught the dogs. Then we carefully selected and strung the designated chicken bodies around their necks. Sure enough, they hated it, but after a few days, Freud and Hosepipe began snapping at one another’s chicken body. The smell and the flies and the feathers were disgusting, so after two or three days of this ridiculous exercise, we liberated the chicken bodies and gave them a decent burial.

“That’ll teach ’em,” Hawkins said, determinedly. “No more chickaholics!”

Unfortunately, he was wrong. A few days later, more dead chickens ended up on our front porch, and we knew we had to act fast. We threw Freud into the front seat of the Black Falcon to take him to Walton’s neighbor’s house in Gatlinburg, hoping to retrieve him when the heat died down. However, any thoughts of bringing him back to the farm faded when Ol’ Bud passed us on the narrow Valley Road as we headed out.

Bud was driving like a mad man toward our farmhouse, and his shotgun was in the rack behind his head. Freud still had feathers around his ears and throat. Hawkins shoved the confused dog’s head down below the window line, and we waved at Ol’ Bud like a couple of drunk tourists.

That most likely saved Freud’s life, but he was never to be a farm dog again—Walton’s neighbor fell in love with him and he became her dog for life. However, that would not keep Freud from sneaking out at night (through the cat door in the kitchen) and roaming the back alleys of the restaurants and fast food places of Gatlinburg.

For a while, there was a pencil sketch of Freud taped up on the wall of the Gatlinburg KFC that had been drawn by Coonskin Billy, one of the cooks that we knew from The Local Watering Hole. Coonskin always made sure that the pooch

got all the scraps and leftovers when he visited after hours. Coonskin later told Hawkins that Freud rarely showed up alone; he usually brought a date—and it was a different one every night—German Shepherds, Collies, Chihuahuas, pure breds and mutts—Freud played the field.

“Freud was a chicken fiend and a sex fiend,” Hawkins told Coonskin.



Isn't That Chicken a Little Tough?

Hosepipe didn't make out as well as his former sidekick. For a week or two after the *chicken-on-a-rope* episode, things sort of returned to normal. It became apparent that Freud had been the mastermind behind all of the chicken murders, because no more dead chickens showed up in the yard or around the house. Then one morning, I put Hosepipe's dry dog food in his bowl on the back porch.

Although the view from the rear of the house was stunning—the yard behind the house sloped down steeply to the creek revealing a picture post-card view of the mountain—we mostly used the back porch to store our art supplies, along with the galvanized tub that we used for our Saturday baths. That's also where we kept Hosepipe's food and water bowls and where he was fed. The back door led from the back porch right into the

small farmhouse kitchen, but there were no windows on the kitchen's back wall; the kitchen only had windows on the sides.

On the west side, the kitchen window looked out into the yard where the old pump stood guarding the abandoned chicken house. Out the kitchen's east window you could scan the side porch and the yard that gently sloped down to the creek beyond the stately old oak tree that shaded the farmhouse.

And so it was that we only *heard* the fracas occurring on the back porch that fateful morning. It sounded like a fight scene with toenails scratching the boards of the porch and a sharp *ka-ping!* echoing loudly from the metal dog dish. I immediately looked out the kitchen window to the west and saw Hosepipe backed up against the concrete pump housing; he was staring with anger and fear at something on the back porch.

As soon as I threw open the back door, I discovered that the *something* was the chicken that had been so miserably tormented by the dogs and had gone missing.

He was back.

His tailfeathers, for the most part, had also grown back, and he, himself had gotten considerably larger. It looked as if he had been working out with some kind of chicken trainer. What's more, he was back with a bad attitude and a hankering for dry dog food.

From that point on, he held the upper hand (claw? wing?) over the solitary dog. We finally had to switch Hosepipe's mealtime to after dark—when we knew the chicken would have already retired to the formerly abandoned chicken house. Unfortunately, it took us nearly a week to figure that out, and unlike the bulked-up chicken, the poor dog was nearly *skin and bones* when we finally arrived at a satisfactory solution.

But also the chicken, in exacting his revenge on Hosepipe, refused to settle for merely stealing his food and altering his mealtime. The chicken didn't just push the envelope—he licked it, stamped it and sent it airmail. No matter where the dog laid down, or what time of day, the chicken sought him out. In a scene repeated dozens of times throughout the day, the chicken would spot the dog lying

under a tree or on the porch, and would slowly make his approach while uttering a low crooning noise. Hosepipe would immediately wake up and find the inevitable source of the sound and look around nervously. Meanwhile, the chicken would pick up speed and advance toward the dog, walking sideways while flapping his opposite wing. At first, the dog called his bluff, but then it became painfully apparent that the bird was spoiling for a fight. The chicken never bluffed. He would leap up onto the hapless dog's back and dig in with his spurs. After a few halfhearted attempts to fight off the chicken, Hosepipe would finally yield and would ultimately find another spot on the opposite side of the farmyard. After an hour or so, the rooster would eventually find him and the whole scene would be repeated again. It was a bad life for a dog.



As the days passed, the chicken began chasing the dog around the chicken yard in a twisted parody of what the two dogs had put him through. At this stage of the game, however, the rooster was still afraid of humans, and we could still protect the dog when things got out of hand, as it occasionally did.

Hawkins and I gradually came to accept that the *chicken vs. dog* show was just going to have to be one more attraction at the farm for our city friends to enjoy; drive down from Nashville, check out the incredible beauty of the mountains, breathe in the country air, play some bluegrass until the wee hours and then, the next morning, sit out on the porch and watch as the Valley Neighborhood Playhouse presents “Foghorn Leghorn Terrorizes Huckleberry Hound.”

One morning, however, we heard a new sound; it was the *brockbrockbrock* of a frightened chicken. Naturally, we ran to the window to see what was going on. Just beyond the chicken yard in the upper pasture we saw the fleeting image of the big chicken bobbing and weaving like a panic-stricken quarterback running for his life. “Guess ol’ Hosepipe got tired of being pushed around and finally got the nerve up to show that chicken who’s boss,” Hawkins casually observed.

But then in unison, we glanced out the front door, because the half-asleep dog was thumping his tail in response to his name. We then turned our attention to the upper pasture, just in time to see a healthy remnant of Ol' Bud's herd charging—heads down—after the fleeing bird.

“The chicken's done gone and ticked off the cows,” I said, “I guess that chicken macho act doesn't carry as much weight in bovine circles.”

Hawkins smiled a dreamy grin. “It's always so serendipitous when farm animals interact.”

Little did we know that it was only a matter of time before the chicken would abandon the cows in exchange for human targets. A few weekends later, this became apparent when our friend Lloyd showed up at the farm. Lloyd, Hawkins and I had all met at the same theme park where we drew caricatures, and we had spent many a late night together, trolling Nashville bars for girls and beers.

Lloyd had striking good looks, and he drove a Harley to boot—*with* boots, in fact. He never stayed in one place very long, whether it was an apartment, job, or, for that matter, party. He wasn't from Nashville, or even the South; actually, Lloyd didn't seem to be from any specific place, just from “someplace up north.”

Interestingly, beneath the rugged veneer, there was a current of insecurity and indecision. From what he had shared with us, it seemed that for most of his adult life, he had relied on his *Marlboro man* façade to attract women and to intimidate the competition.

However, under the right (or wrong) circumstances, the rugged veneer would prove itself to be paper-thin.

There was one episode at an after-hours party late one night during our *theme-park-caricature-summer* that brought this to light. It was a wild event at a house on a lake just outside Nashville, and the place was lit up by wild emotions and Japanese lanterns bobbing over the shining water.

The other caricature and portrait artists from the theme park were there and had already gone in, and the movements of the wild dancing crowd inside were ee-

riely reflected on the lake in contrast to the gentle lapping waves. I was standing at the entrance on the dock with Lloyd taking in the whole scene.

“I’m going home,” he said suddenly.

“What?!” I said. “You’re kidding. We just got here.”

“I don’t care. I’m freaking.”

“Freaking? What do you mean *you’re freaking?*” I asked, “We haven’t even gotten into the place! We came all the way out here and haven’t even made it inside the door!”

“You see all these people?” he said, twisting his rugged face. “They could all kick my butt.”

“Okay, if you say so...but why would they? Who wants to kick your butt?”

“I don’t know, but all of them could,” he said, “Even the girls.”

I squinted at his face to see if he was serious.

“It’s embarrassing,” he said.

“What?! You’re serious?!”

“See ya,” he said. And with that, he lit a cigarette and hustled off the dock and disappeared into the night on his Harley, its engine echoing off the glistening lake. It spooked me enough to go on home, myself.

Consequently, it wasn’t a total surprise when Lloyd was the one the chicken picked as his first human target. Here’s the thing—the chicken had an uncanny ability to see through pretentious posturing, peeling back one’s mortal facade. (When I read that line out loud, it sounds totally ridiculous, but I’m just saying, that crazy bird could see into your inner soul—and *exploit it.*)

We were having breakfast coffee on the front porch when we first heard the screams down the dusty driveway. Hawkins and I chased off the chicken and caught up with Lloyd at Valley Road. “That chicken wants to kick my butt,” he said. “I am so out of here!”

“What?! You just got here!” said Hawkins, looking over at me incredulously for some sort of agreement. “You drove all the way here from Nashville and didn’t even make it inside the farmhouse!” But Hawkins’s words were drowned out by the big Harley as it kicked up the dust from the farm’s dusty driveway. A minute later, Lloyd was turning on to Valley Road as he headed back to Nashville.



After the Lloyd Meets the Chicken morning, the rooster stepped up his game; Ol’ Bud, Hawkins and I were the only people that he wouldn’t chase. In fact, he became the watchdog that Hosepipe and Freud had failed to be. No nonresident of the farm escaped his evil eye and sidestep aggression. He began terrifying our friends—our musician friends from Nashville quit visiting the farm.

The word about the chicken had spread widely and quickly. *That’s one foul chicken*, one of them said.

Even Darryl from down the road wasn’t immune. He wasn’t totally surprised; he had grown up around chickens, so he knew their vindictive and aggressive nature. He had first visited our place within a month or so of our moving in, and immediately discovered the Hawk’s most recent issue of *Oui*, which was lying on the cargo-trunk-turned-coffee table in the farmhouse’s living room.

Hawkins had taken great pains to have his subscription of the magazine sent to the farm, and the mailman had driven all the way up to the house to deliver the first issue that arrived. “Don’t get to deliver many of these,” he said.

When Darryl spotted the magazine on the coffee table, he squealed with delight, “Oh You Eye! Oh You Eye!”

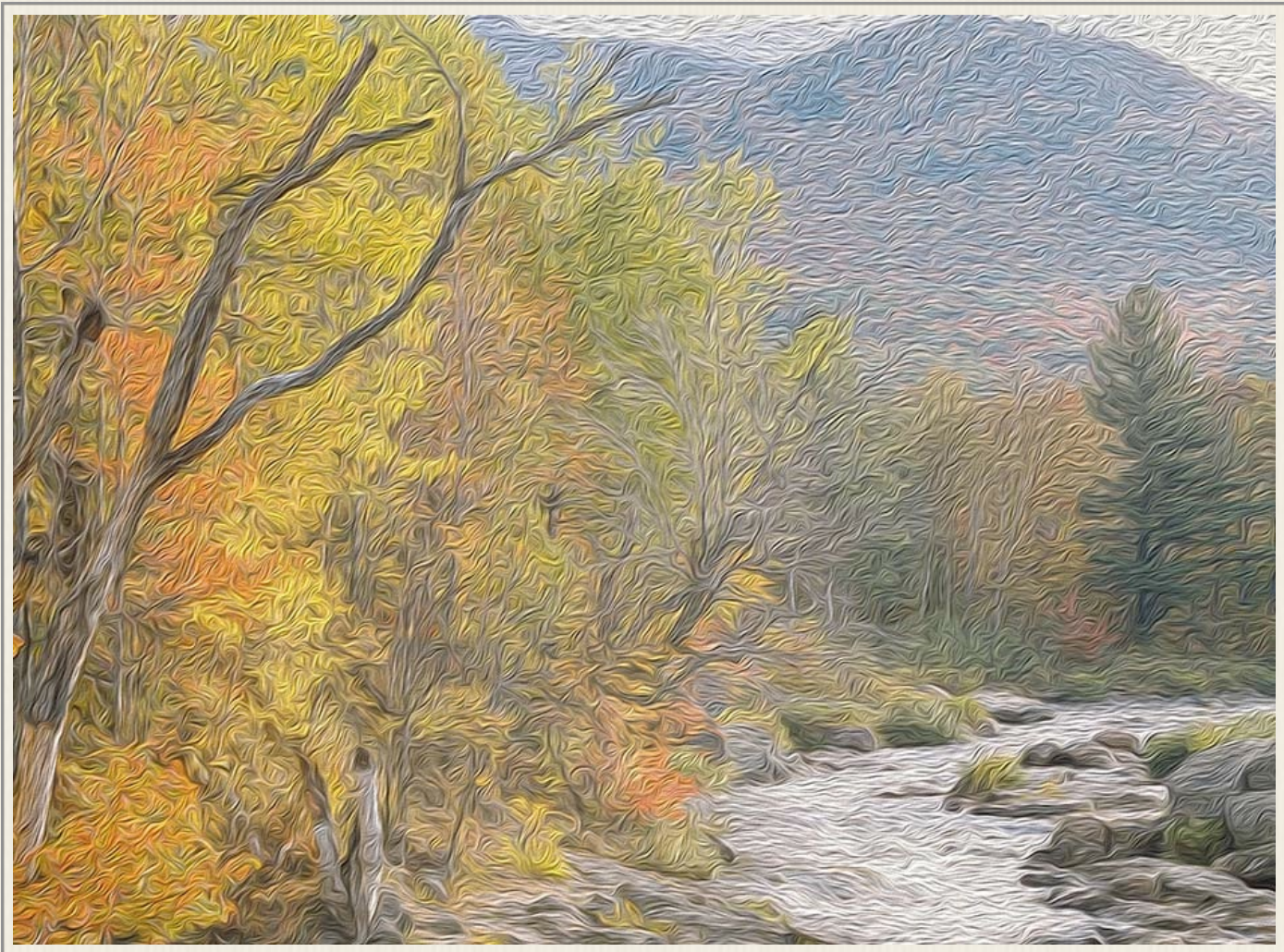
“Uh, Darryl,” Hawkins said, “I believe that’s pronounced ‘we,’ as in ‘Yes.’ Wink, wink.”

“*Yes, We Eye!*” Darryl exclaimed.

Soon after that, he began showing up with various local boys along with their instruments.

The chicken, however, had an intense hatred for Darryl. No one ever knew why. Maybe it was because of Darryl's sport coat and bow tie that he always wore when he came over. Or maybe it was because the big chicken knew that Darryl knew him for what he really was: *an everyday barnyard rooster*. For whatever reason, when Darryl would drive up into the yard, the bird would appear out of nowhere and would bear down on his pickup like a big white kamikaze. He'd circle the truck until Darryl blew the horn. Then one of us would come out on the front porch and chase the chicken down the driveway. Darryl would haul his instruments out and run for the door.

And all during the time we'd be playing music, the chicken would be up on the front porch, peering in through the old screen door. "Law! Look at that durn bird," Darryl would say, "He's just waitin' on me to step out of the house." And so, we'd play into the night when Darryl could be sure that the rooster would be safe asleep inside the chicken house. And once the chicken was safely asleep inside the chicken house, I'd also be able to fill up Hosepipe's food bowl.



The Fall of Tennessee

Autumn in the mountains—with its patchwork quilt thrown over the ridges and valleys—was always one of God’s gifts to Tennessee. One early October afternoon, I was sitting out on the front porch of the farmhouse with a cup of coffee, admiring the changing colors of the tree line on the mountain across the way.

It looked like the mountain was a big pile of green leaves that was being topped off by reds, yellows and oranges. The bright colors went about half-way down the mountain before segueing into the light and dark greens.

I knew that in the coming weeks, the whole mountain would be a sea of color for a few breathtaking days. Then, the sad and stately trees would gradually cast off all their covers and hunker down, bare, for the approaching winter.

My reverie was interrupted by a distant car turning into the farm's driveway; once it made it halfway up the dusty drive, I was surprised to see it was my father's car.

He pulled up into the yard, got out of the car and sat down beside me on the porch.

"Well, this is certainly an unexpected surprise," I said.

"I was in the neighborhood," he said.

"Right."

"Well, I was in Knoxville. I had to pick up some parts. It's just a day trip. We got church tonight."

"I was just looking at the mountain's leaves."

"Yeah. They're beautiful. That's another reason I picked this week for the trip. The parts actually could have waited."

I brought my dad a cup of coffee, and we sat there on the porch in silence, just looking up at the mountains all around. After a few minutes, he cleared his throat to speak.

"Can I ask you something?" he said.

"Shoot."

"What are you doing?"

"Uh...looking at the leaves on the mountain...?"

"No...what are you doing with your life, Danny?" he asked.

"Uh...looking at the leaves on the mountain...?" I repeated, though I knew it was not the answer he was looking for.

"Okay, let me rephrase the question," he said patiently. "What are you doing with your college degree?"

"Oh, we used that a few weeks back. That first cold snap caught us by surprise...before we could store up any firewood, so, you know, we had to make do with what we could find."

“I’m glad you’re taking it so seriously.” He was starting to become irritated.

“Okay, what do you want me to do?” I asked.

“Look,” he said, “I was raised in a farmhouse like this. No running water. No electricity...”

“We’ve got electricity,” I said, meekly.

“You know what I mean. I spent my life working hard to make sure you and your sister wouldn’t have to live like this. You’ve had your fun. I think it’s time you settled down and got a real job.”

“There are no jobs around here for me to use my degree in watercolor painting.”

“Then move back to Nashville,” he said, dodging my obvious sarcasm, “Or Knoxville, or Atlanta, or anywhere you can use your talents and your degree.”

“Okay, I’ll think about it,” I said, wanting to change the subject.

“That’s all I ask,” he said, handing me his empty coffee cup and standing up. “Think about it. I just don’t want you wasting your life. Look, I gotta get going if I’m going to make it back in time for church tonight. Oh yeah, I almost forgot...”

I followed him to his car and he reached through the driver’s window and pulled out an envelope. “Your mailman was at your box when I pulled in the drive, so I got your mail today. Thought it’d save you a trip down your driveway. Don’t you ever get tired of walking a half-a-mile to get your mail everyday?”

I sensed an opening to *re-open the relocate and get a job* conversation, so I just shrugged.

“By the way, what’s a ‘Lloyder,’ anyway?” he asked.

“A *what?*”

“Lloyder. That’s what it says on the envelope.”

“Oh,” I said, examining the envelope, “It’s a letter from Lloyd. Our friend, Lloyd. He calls them ‘Lloyders.’ You know, Lloyder, *letter*, Lloyder? Weird. This one has a New York postmark.”



“Hey Sport,” the letter began. Lloyd sometimes called me Sport...a play on my last name, as in Shortt Sport.

The letter continued:

“How are things at the farm? How’s Hawkins? Hopefully, by now the Hawk has killed that chicken. Or maybe a real hawk got it. Either way, that bird needs to go. Now!!! Bad bird! Bad bird! But guess what...that crazy chicken can’t get to me, anymore. Not unless it has a NYC subway token and knows how to catch the Double R. As you have probably surmised by the postmark on this here Lloyd, I myself have re-located to the big city. The Big Apple, in fact. I got tired of sitting around listening to y’all play music all the time and wanted to stick my own big toe in the music swimming pool. And, my cousin’s friend’s cousin knew someone up here that knew someone at a big-time music magazine, and they needed an artist. It ain’t caricatures, but it’s still artsy-fartsy. The mag is called *MuzicZene*. You’ve probably seen it laying around the recording studios you and Hawkins hang out at. Anywho, this is the coolest place to work in the world. I think you should move up here and try it. Seriously, dude. Lots more chicks (that’s chicks, not chickens) up here than in that po-dunk valley of yours (no offense, Hawkins!). There’s always something going on. I know you’ll be glad to hear that I’ve gotten over my fear of parties. Maybe it’s just because I know there’s no redneck girl in this city that wants to kick my butt (or chicken, either. Ha!). I know there is no way in the world Hawkins would ever live in the big city (he loves that farm way too much), but I can seriously see you hanging out up here. In fact, and here’s the reason for this here correspondence, I already lined a job up for you! How would you like to be an artist at *MuzicZene*? I’m giving up the job. I know, I know, I just got here. The thing is, I really miss driving my Harley to work. I don’t even have it in the city, it’s safe at my cousin’s place out in Jersey. First of all, the cab drivers are all crazy and they don’t really worry about running over a biker. But mostly, I’m afraid some lowlife will boost it, and that would be the end of me. But, as for this job, it’s a great gig. Also, I hate leaving them in the lurch. So, I talked to my boss, Zanzo,

and he was okay with giving you the job. So how about it? You can call me here at the magazine and tell me what you think. Oh, that's right...you don't have a phone! My advice is for you to drive over to the valley gas station and drop a coin in the payphone and make yourself a collect call. The receptionist here's name is Bitsy and she is standing by waiting on your call!!! Talk to you soon!!! Your pal, Lloyd."



Chickens and Stars

Most of my friends from Tennessee knew the story about the big chicken. It was just one of the animal tales hauled out (usually in the wee hours of the morning after all-night bluegrass parties) to be shared along with enough alcohol to enable everyone to find the bucolic antics appropriately amusing. My friend, Kenny Tom had his story about the blue-eyed albino squirrel and the electric typewriter and my cousin Steve-o had his story about his tree-climbing coondog and the dynamite caps and well, I had my chicken story. What's more, the story had legs; it had continued to grow and evolve.

But, imagine my surprise when I found myself revealing the latest version of it to a sprinkling of New Yorkers one April Monday night in a cozy little Manhattan bar, down the street from the *MuzicZene* office. And, even

more surprising, the editor was not only listening intently, he was actually smiling at the more amusing, if not sadistic, parts of the story.

It was not really a planned event; in fact, it was a bit of a fluke that we were there at that moment, throwing back adult beverages in the comfy confines of the midtown bar. It was my boss (and art director), Zanzo's birthday, and though he was openly verbal with his disrespect, disregard, and outright disapproval of me, it had been strongly suggested by one of the magazine's assistant editors that it would be frowned upon if I didn't show up for this after-work alcoholic birthday salute.

Zanzo had inherited me after Lloyd left him in the lurch, and though he didn't try very hard to find a replacement for me, he insisted on making my existence miserable. I have to believe that, in spite of what Lloyd had said in his letter, Zanzo had been nonplussed—*if not downright irritated*—that he had trained Lloyd, only to have him leave and turn over the job to a good ol' boy from Tennessee. At least, Lloyd had grown up somewhere up north, and spoke the language.

Since the magazine wrapped on Thursday nights and printed on Fridays, Monday was typically the night to do something after work, be it a concert or, in this case, a birthday drink-along. By the time I got to the bar, the editor, a couple of writers, the flighty production girl from Long Island, the mailroom boys—and of course, Zanzo—were already on their second round of chicken wings and their third round of lubricating spirits.

“Well, well, here comes our office hillbilly,” said Zanzo when I slid up to the table, “Did you ask the bartender where they kept their white lightning and their corncob pipes?”

Some of the staff snickered, and the corncob pipe reference made me shudder, but Buck, one of the mailroom boys, said, “Come on, Zanzo, cut him some slack; being from the South don't automatically make you a hillbilly. My man Hank Williams was from the South; you callin' him a hillbilly? He was a musical genius!”

“Wow,” said Zanzo, stroking his goatee, “I don't think I'd put Hank Williams and Shortt in the same room or category.”

“Actually...” I started to say, but before I could speak, Sterling O’Toole, one of the magazine’s writers clinked his glass with his fork.

“Grab a seat, Shortt,” he said. He apparently had been in the middle of a celebrity story about Royce Royal, a New Jersey rock star, and he was obviously irritated that his story had been interrupted.

Once I was seated with a beer in hand, he continued and gestured animatedly with a sauce-dipped wing, “Anyway,” he continued, “...*as I was saying*, Royce had always wanted a ranch or a farm. I think in his mind, he envisioned himself as some sort of cowboy riding the range, roping cows or whatever those guys do for fun. And like I said, his real estate guy was more of a fan than a *real* real estate guy. I guess he thought he’d really hit the big time when he scored Royce as a client. He kept saying, ‘Garden State Real Estate caters to all wants and needs,’ like it was his company’s slogan or something. And Royce was saying, ‘Money is no object...I just need to be happy with how the spread, you know, looks and feels. It’s got to have *the vibe*, dig? And it also has to be somewhere in Jersey, ’cause well, we’re Jersey boys and Jersey rocks! And most of all, it has to have the ranch animals, because that’s what’s gonna make it, you know, *really cool*. You know, like a working ranch-farm. We’re thinking about doing a country-western album, and a ranch would be the perfect place to lay the tracks. Fly them Nashville banjo boys up and show ’em a real ranch-farm. And also, slowing things down, settling on a place out in the country...it would make my old man proud...you know he’s big into the Salvation Army.’”

“Uh, O’Toole,” Buck interjected, “What does the Salvation Army have to do with a ranch in New Jersey with farm animals?”

“Crap, don’t look at me,” O’Toole snapped, wincing at being interrupted again by another underling, “Do I look like Royce Royal? I’m just the messenger. Anyway, again, *as I was saying*, Royce and the boys all pile into the tour bus along with this goofy Garden State Real Estate agent and they’re driving through the hills of New Jersey until, finally, in the middle of nowhere, they come to this dirt-and-gravel driveway, and they proceed to coax that big ol’ tour bus through the gate and down the lane. The bus goes as far as the driver dared to go on that muddy

drive, but even then, it's too late, because it's already sinking to its back axle in this gooey Jersey quicksand.

"But Royce don't care. He's jumping off the bus and hootin' and runnin' toward the barn along with the rest of the band. I don't know what he expected to find inside. Horses? Cows? I don't know. All I know is they all disappeared inside, and two seconds later, that crazy rotten barn door is flying off its hinges and Royce and the boys are hightailin' it back to the bus *that's still sinking down into the mud*. And right behind 'em is this bad-boy rooster, *right at their heels!*"

"Let me get this straight," said Zanzo slurring his words ever so slightly, "They're running from a chicken?! Oh, is that too funny!"

I had been politely listening and sipping on my draft beer, but on the inside, I was a little more than just a bit amused by this table of urban dwellers sitting around grooving on a story about a big-time rock star and his dealings with farm animals like they're some sort of alien beings. Finally, I couldn't contain myself.

"Good grief, Zanzo," I blurted out. Everyone's head swiveled toward me in one synchronized motion as if to say, "*It talks!*" But Buck smiled and gave me a "thumbs up" as he downed his beer.

"That was, in fact, the correct and prudent response for those guys," I said. "You never, ever should mess with an angry chicken. In fact, sometimes a chicken doesn't even have to be angry to give you a hard time."

Zanzo narrowed his eyes and scowled. "Now tell us again, Shortt...*why* exactly are you here right now?" He tugged at his shaggy goatee and ran his hand over his eyes and into his hair as he always did when he was annoyed. After he repeated this gesture, his hair sprang back over and through his fingers like a big black frontal cowlick.

But it was too late for even Zanzo to stop me at that point. I was only a half of a beer into the conversation, but the others had been busily fueling their states of mind for three quarters of an hour, and they weren't about to let my "*I know a chicken story*" hanging curve ball sail harmlessly over the plate.



Drawing on Experience & Napkins

“So,” said the editor slowly and evenly, “You have experience with this kind of chicken?”

“It’s not exactly something I’d put on my résumé—as I’m sure Zanzo can attest to.” Zanzo opened his mouth and held up his hand to say something, but I pressed on. “I grew up in the suburbs of Nashville and never considered myself a country boy, but I did have relatives that lived on a farm on the Tennessee-Kentucky line, and they did have chickens.”

“Well, cockle-doodle-doo!” said Zanzo. He adjusted his oversized tinted glasses with a thin forefinger as he scowled. A pale ocean-blue rock t-shirt promoting a new band called *Anchor* wrapped around the upper part of his lanky frame. The shirt featured a large gold anchor above dripping purple type that screamed: “*Anchor—Let Me Down Easy.*”

I continued, “One Sunday afternoon we were all sitting on the porch at my uncle’s farm, and my cousin Hank was in the yard behind the house throwing rocks at the chickens. Hank was also from the city.”

“I wouldn’t exactly call Nashville a city,” said Zanzo, derisively scowling and looking around at the others, but, to his further annoyance, they were actually *listening* to me.

“Anyway—“ I continued, ignoring Zanzo, “Hank was throwing rocks at the hens, and—for the most part—missing with every throw, so it was pretty harmless. But behind him, one of the roosters came running up, claws out, wings flapping, and he jumped up and attached himself to Hank’s *Mighty Mouse* t-shirt. We heard him scream, and he came running at full tilt around the house beating at the rooster on his back yelling, ‘Get him off! Get him off!’ But none of the relatives moved from the porch, even after ol’ Hank circled the farmhouse five or six times. They all knew he’d been messing with the chickens, and that’s what sometimes happened when you did that. Call it rural justice or country karma, if you will. My old Uncle Ned was the *only* one that said anything, and all he said was, ‘Running ’round like that with those big ol’ wings flappin’ behind him, he kinda looks like an angel, don’t he? Well, I mean...an angel that’s knows he’s done somethin’ wrong and and is havin’ to run from a chicken...’

“Oh, good grief,” Zanzo sighed. But the others were scooting their chairs closer to the table and ordering more drinks.

“How did they detach the chicken?” asked the production girl.

“I honestly don’t know.” I said, “When we left that afternoon, Hank was still running around the house.”

The editor had stopped laughing and was probing for a weak spot in the explanation. “Come on...it sounds like it was an isolated event. One bad chicken does not a breed make.”

“Actually, no it wasn’t just the one chicken,” I said. “I was first attacked by a chicken when I was five years old. And, as recently as a couple of years ago, I was

looked on with contempt by a chicken, who really, really wanted to attack me, but, well...”

“Well, what?” the editor asked.

“I guess he was chicken.”

“Oh, good grief,” Zanzo slurred, “He’s taking you all—*you wawl*—for a ride. Some kind of ride. A *hayride*!”

“Let him finish,” said the editor, glaring at Zanzo.

“Why would I make up a story about being attacked by a chicken?” I asked Zanzo.

He looked around the bar and stuck his index finger down into an empty shot glass and spun it like a top, and then he whispered something into O'Toole's ear. But O'Toole was waiting for some sort of explanation, so I continued.

“When I was five, my parents took me to visit my Uncle Carl, who had a chicken farm up in Iowa. Uncle Carl was in the process of inoculating all his chickens, so he sent me into one of the chicken houses to get the next bird. This particular chicken had other ideas, I suppose, and decided to go for my throat. Fortunately, he missed, but he did get a big hunk of my *Mighty Mouse* shirt.”

“*Mighty Mouse*!? What is it with you and all those *Mighty Mouse* shirts?” Zanzo demanded.

“I just wanted to make sure you were paying attention.” I told him. “Besides, that's not the major chicken story. The one from a few years ago is really more interesting.”

“So...this next story happened in Nashville?” asked the editor, who was getting more and more interested with every drink.

“The *city* of Nashville?” Zanzo asked, sarcastically.

“No. Well, actually...it kind of did begin in Nashville, now that you mention it. I worked at this major theme park—you'd know it instantly if I told you the name—”

“Hicks’ Flags Over Nashville?” Zanzo said.

No one laughed and I ignored him and continued, “Anyway, I worked at this theme park as a caricature artist.”

“Cool,” said Buck, “So *that’s* why you’re always drawing cartoons...”

“Yeah. And that’s where I came to meet my friend, Hawkins, and that’s how this particular chicken story begins—somewhere between Nashville and a farm in the mountains of East Tennessee. Actually, it also ties into me being here telling this story, because that’s also where I met Lloyd, who got me the job here. You all remember Lloyd...”

“Oh yeah, I remember our good friend Lloyd, alright,” Zanzo hissed.



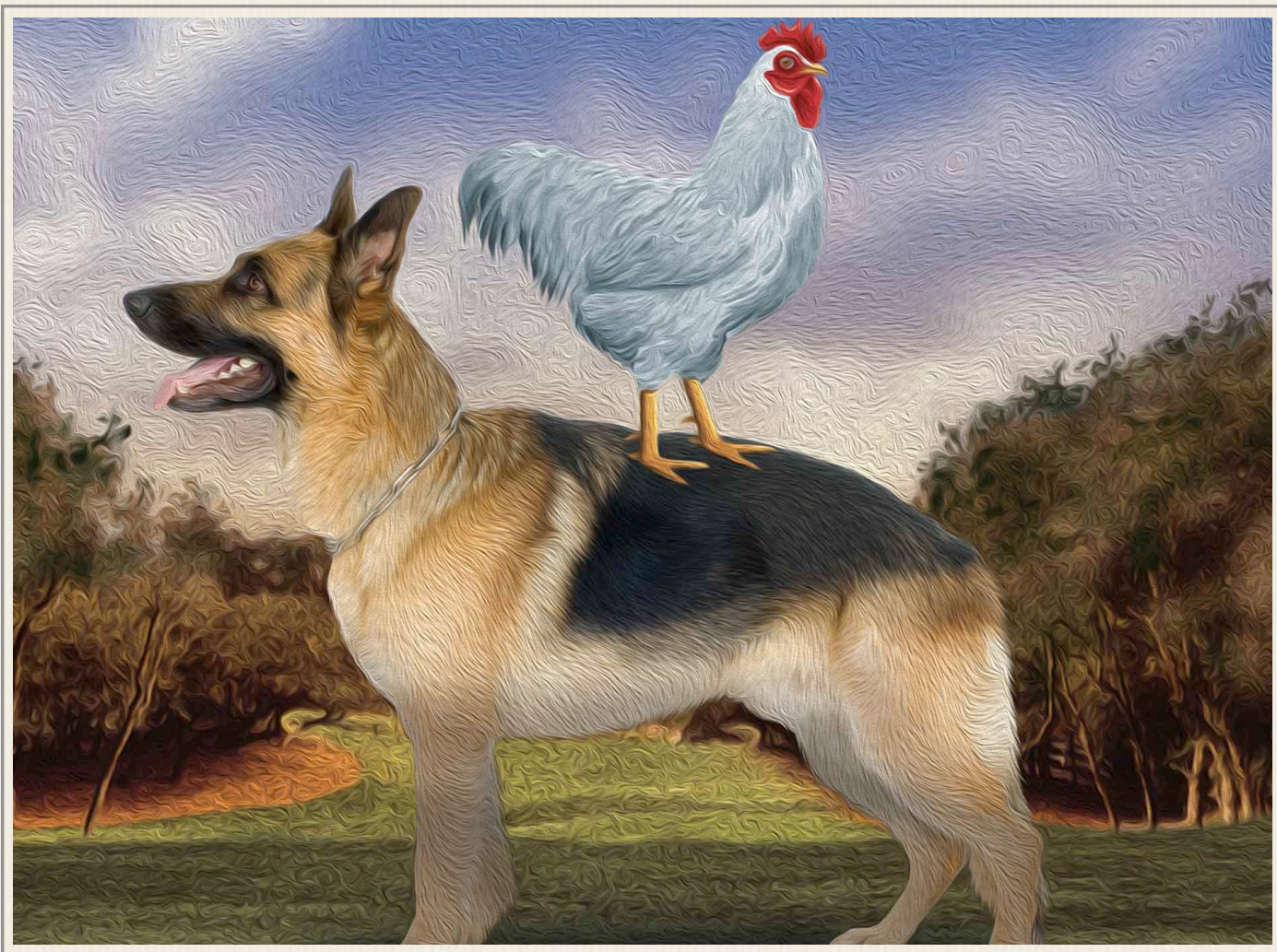
With the exception of Zanzo, who was rapidly fading into a vodka and tonic haze, my magazine co-workers seemed genuinely interested in the tale of the chicken. So, I led them all from the table in a dark and smoky bar in midtown Manhattan, down the Valley Road and up the dusty driveway leading to the farmhouse. As I unfastened and laid out the story, I began to draw on a bar napkin with a ballpoint pen that I had brought from the office. The story and the drawing began to intersect, so that by the time I got to the part about Darryl, a cartoon chicken was overtaking the whole napkin. What’s more, with the drawing’s oversized glasses, long beak, shaggy rooster goatee and cascading comb, he began to look like a cross between the big chicken and Zanzo, who at this point, had passed the alcoholic point of no return. In fact, Zanzo was so out of it that he was the only one at the table who never eventually recognized that he and the chicken on the napkin were essentially one and the same. Happy birthday, Zanzo.

I’m not going to say that the Zanzo birthday party rendition of the *Tale of the Chicken* was the absolute best telling of the story; there was one particular performance at a late-night Gatlinburg party where everyone assumed a character, and we

acted it out with Hawkins playing the part of the chicken, and his second cousin from West Tennessee played the part of Hawkins. However, the Zanzo birthday party version would have to be included in the top five. Maybe that's because the audience was so amused and intrigued by the hillbilly overtones of the epic. Or maybe it was because of the visual enhancement of the drawing that evolved before their very eyes on the napkin. But, if I had to provide an educated guess, I would say that it was because the fate of the chicken was fresh on my mind that night, and that's what most likely caused me to press onward so aggressively with the story. In fact, that particular telling of the story would be the first time that the chicken's final chapter would be revealed.

Here's why—the Saturday before the after-hours party, I had received a letter from Hawkins, filling me in on the details. At that time I was still living in a one-room studio apartment in Brooklyn Heights on the street that ran parallel to the Promenade (you've probably seen the Promenade in a hundred movies and TV shows...with its stunning view of lower Manhattan, it's the New York City landmark equivalent to a character actor). Whenever I got mail from home, or in this case, a fat letter from East Tennessee, I would stop off and buy a bottle of beer and take it and the letter to the Promenade and make myself comfortable on one of the metal and concrete benches. I was always entertained by the juxtaposition of the news from home against the dramatic backdrop view from the Promenade of the Brooklyn Bridge and lower Manhattan across the harbor. The words would always spring from the letters in a soft and familiar Tennessee accent and waft over the Promenade before being batted down by the sharp urban reality of the joggers, strollers and panhandlers.

When I opened this envelope and pulled out Hawk's letter, a few snapshots of the farm and the mountains behind the farm spilled out, along with the Hawk's pencil drawing of an armadillo on a unicycle, juggling toasters and chainsaws. The unicycle's tire was patched with band-aids, and the armadillo had one star-shaped earring. It was also wearing a beanie copter with a crude rowboat anchor etched on it. The content of the letter, however, overshadowed the snapshots and the armadillo picture.



News From Home

The Hawk's letter was written, as always, on the same kind of artist's layout paper that we always had lying around the farmhouse. Ol' Bud had scrawled a pre-letter message at the top of the first page. "Good luck in New York City," he wrote, "*Don't git runned over!*"

And with no further ado, the Hawk began the letter:

"Howdy! Here we are at Spring again. It was a long, hard Winter and I am sure glad to see it getting warm again. Things have changed around here quite a bit since you left. First of all, Hosepipe is dead. Or, at least, we think he's dead. We found his collar and some blood and fur over by the bridge as you get into the Park. Remember, we wrote 'Hosepipe' on his collar with the woodburning set that we unearthed in the barn when we first moved in. So we knew it was his collar that we found at the bridge.

“I talked to some of the park rangers about it, and they first asked me what in the world was your dog doing in a National Park without a leash, and *didn't we know that was illegal?!!* I told them that he had recently gotten into the habit of chasing us in the car, but we usually picked up speed once we got out of the driveway and usually, when he couldn't keep up with us, or see us down the road, he'd turn around and go back to the farm. It snowed back in January, though, and we were snowed in for nearly a week. We were about to go stir crazy, so when it finally got clear enough for us to get the truck out of the driveway, we decided to go into Gatlinburg and drink a few beers. Of course, Hosepipe took off after us, and with all the snow and ice, we couldn't outrun him.

“By the time we got up the first hill inside the park, we looked down, and there he was, right at the side of the truck. By the time we got to the main road in the Park, we'd lost him, and we figured he'd make his way back home...he always did before. We didn't think anymore about it until he still was missing the following day. The rangers asked where we last saw him and when I told them, they said that they'd been having trouble with the wild boars around that area. So I guess they must have got ol' Hosepipe. The vicious swine! Hosepipe wasn't good for much, but I sure have missed him. He was never what I would call an intelligent dog, so for all I know, he went right up to those wild pigs, thinking they'd run and squawk like chickens when he chased them. Imagine poor Hosepipe's surprise!!!”

The Hawk's letter continued. “Speaking of chickens, I've also got some news on that front,” he wrote, “You remember the big chicken never jumped on any of us that was living here at the farm. Remember, he jumped on everyone else, or at least he threatened to. The whole valley was scared of him! Even Darryl quit coming around. Well, one day I sitting around the farm by myself, and I thought it would be a great day to go fishing. So, I was on my hands and knees trying to look under the porch for a fishing pole. Remember the time Hosepipe was sniffing the hook on one of our poles and got it stuck in his nose? The barb was jammed up into one nostril, and the other end stuck out of his snout like the front-end piece of a combat jet. He ran around the yard like a banshee and somewhere along the way the pole got lost. I thought maybe it had ended up under the house. So I was crawling around looking for that ol' pole. Well anyway, next thing I know, that fool

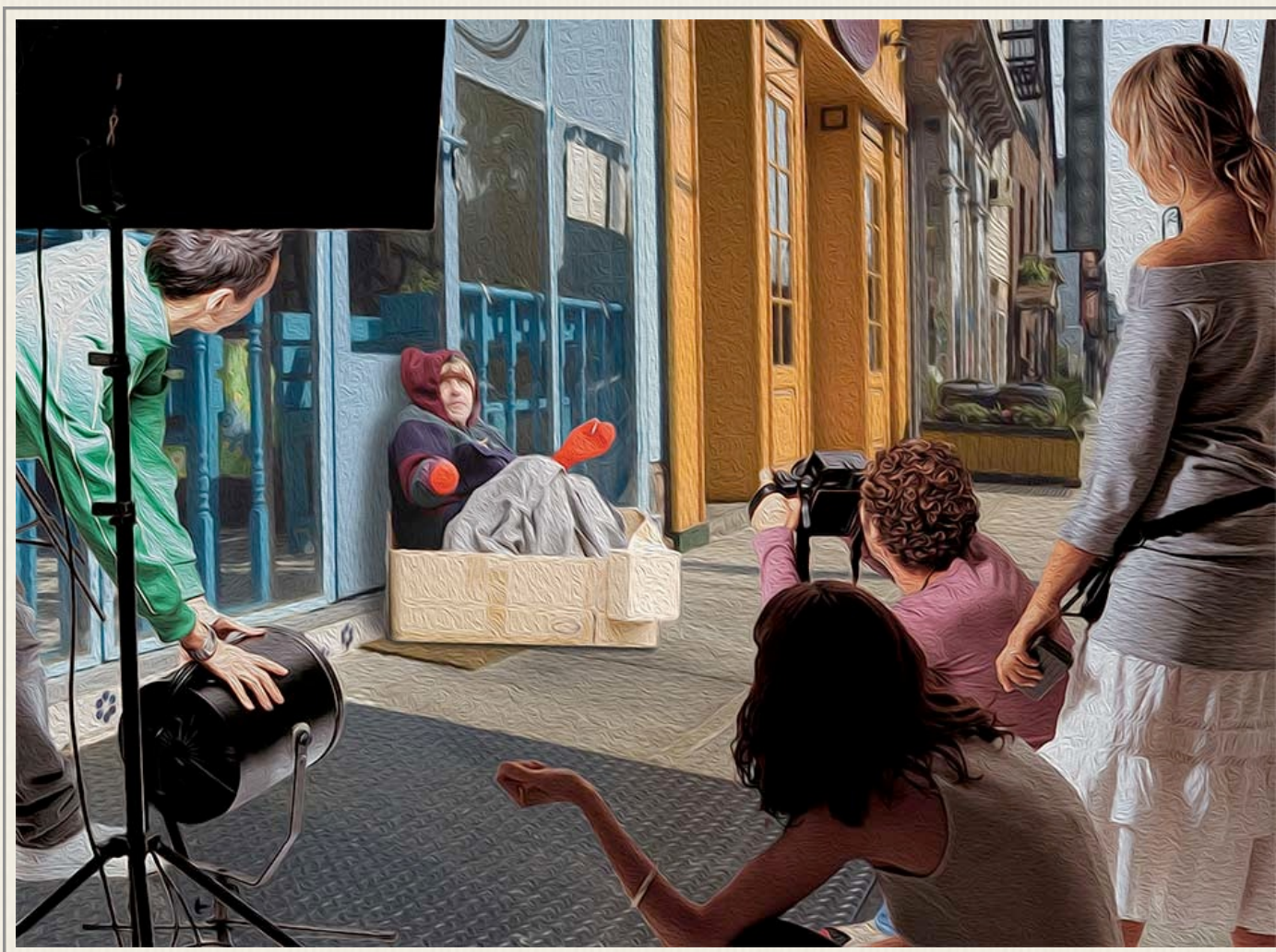
rooster was on my back like he wanted a ride or something. It surprised me alright, but I reached up there behind me and caught him by his scrawny neck and I took him into the chicken house. Once inside the chicken house, I found a bag—I believe it was the same one Sgt. Francis used to bring us the chicken—and I stuffed him inside. Ol’ Bud had a farmer friend at the other end of the valley who had some chickens, so I took him over there and asked if he had any use for him. I did warn him about the rooster’s aggressive tendencies, but he just humored me the way all these old time locals do us city boys. ‘Don’t worry, we’ll take good care of him,’ he told me. Ha!

“The farmer and his wife went to that little Baptist church in the middle of the valley. You may have heard Bud mention the farmer’s wife—she was a prize-winning crabapple jam-maker. Anyway, about a week after our chicken went to live with them, the Baptist preacher’s wife—from the little church—drove out to their place to get some homemade crabapple jam from the farmer’s wife. The preacher’s wife was walking from her car up the stone sidewalk, when the chicken appeared from out of nowhere, and he began to do that weird sideways flapping thing he always did. Of course, the woman was terrified, and she began running as fast as an older plump lady in high heels can possibly go. The chicken stayed right at her heels, pecking at her nylons, and he eventually chased her into the farmer’s barn. She climbed the ladder into the hayloft and was trapped there until the farmer’s wife happened to see her car down in the driveway and wandered around the yard until she heard the screams from the barn. The preacher’s poor wife had been trapped up there in the hayloft for a good three hours and was quite hysterical by the time they got her down. Of course, the farmer’s wife was very embarrassed and wanted to have the chicken executed right there on the spot, but the farmer said that he would take care of it in his own way. I think he secretly admired the way the chicken had held that woman at bay, but naturally, he didn’t tell his wife that.

“So...the farmer quietly caught and boxed up the rooster and took him to his brother-in-law’s up in northeastern Tennessee, right on the Virginia line. His brother-in-law was a *serious* chicken farmer. He had thousands of chickens. He was also amused by this particular chicken’s pluck (or at least, *cluck*). All the big chicken

had to do all day was walk around and act tough and service all the hens he could corner. It was chicken heaven. Every morning this chicken farmer would get up at the crack of dawn, and he and his trusted German Shepherd would herd the chickens into various chicken yards for their morning breakfast. The farmer was particularly proud of this German Shepherd because he had trained him from a pup to be a first-class chicken dog. This dog was always gentle with the chickens and for nearly a dozen years had been an invaluable assistant to the farmer. The dog's talents were widely known throughout the county and the entire region, and he had been written up several times in various local newspapers. I guess that's why it was such a shock to this kindly German Shepherd to have this crazy rooster attack him for no apparent reason. The dog's reaction was swift and severe—he killed the chicken within a few seconds. But somehow, that wasn't enough. He went on to kill at least another 12 or 15 other chickens before the farmer could subdue him. And the farmer could never again trust him with his chickens. His career as a first-class chicken dog came to one screeching, feather-ridden halt.

“So...what do you think, Shortt? Maybe the chicken was symbolic of some sort of larger truth; Life? Power? Death? I don't know. Then again, maybe it was just some stupid bird that didn't know when to quit. I don't mean to go all Zen on you. Actually, a Zen chicken would make a pretty good comic strip. At any rate, just thought I'd let you know about his tragic end. I know you and him were pretty close (ha!). Y'all come see us, and drop me a line when you get a minute or two. Your pal, Hawkins.”



Add Salvation

By the time I revealed the colorful and action-packed end of the chicken story to the people at the table—most of whom were still coherent—it was already late, and the next day was a work day. But something felt different, already. I could see it in my co-workers' eyes as they filed out of the bar that night. And it wasn't just the fact that they had stayed to listen to *and even enjoy* the story (the Long Island production girl was wiping back tears from the revelation of the chicken's tragic end). It also wasn't exactly respect or adulation, but it was at least a step in the right direction for the improvement of my lowly status at the magazine.

As I caught the subway back to Brooklyn Heights that night, I reflected on just how crazily arbitrary it was that a cartoon on a bar napkin and a homespun story about a hapless bully chicken could change all the rules in the game—or, for that matter, change the game, itself. My fellow passen-

gers on the subway that night were the same cast of characters as before—the *late-night-at-the-office* workers, the homeless winos, the teenage gang wannabees, and the sad loners—but again, something was different. For the first time, I realized I was part of the cast, and the play had changed. The voice over the train’s PA was warm and inviting, and for the first time, I thought that just maybe, the tired *late-night-at-the-office* workers would be getting a promotion as a reward for their long hours, and possibly the winos were on their last binge and would be turning over a new leaf. And just maybe, the teenage gangbangers—with the help of their high school counselor—would be accepted into a community college where they would learn a skill to sustain them for life. And finally, could it be that the sad loners at the far end of the subway car would finally meet their soulmates in the near future at their neighborhood laundromat over sweats and undies? Even the lights in the Brooklyn Heights subway station had been changed or repaired. They shone brightly on the station wall’s transit maps and girlie mag ads.

And, as the following days, weeks and months would reveal, although it wasn’t exactly rainbows and unicorns, it really was a turning point in my stay in New York. Naturally, Zanzo was still rude and surly; after I had just recovered from a bout of pneumonia, he dispatched me in the middle of a driving rainstorm with a package of negatives to a warehouse in lower Manhattan, way off the beaten path from the subway. Fortunately, thanks to massive doses of Vitamin C and antibiotics, I didn’t relapse. At the time I thought that he was afraid to fire me, so he hoped that disease would handle the messy business of getting rid of me. Looking back, I realize that the real reason he sent me was that he just didn’t really care what happened to me, one way or the other.

The thing is—the rest of the office began to treat me somewhat differently—specifically, *nicer*. And okay, I wasn’t exactly an innocent lamb, because *Zanzo the Chicken* caricatures started showing up around the office. Of course, I drew the first few, but then, Buck and some of the other mailroom guys started drawing them (unsigned, of course), and Bitsy, the receptionist even offered up a very respectable version. As it turned out, *Zanzo the Chicken was fun and easy to draw!* Some of the drawings were in color, and most of them were better drawn than the first one, but that original one drawn in the dark and smoky bar that night in April was

always the hands-down favorite. When the editor asked if he could have it that night in the bar, I was both surprised and flattered.

But, if things got better for me, the worm had turned for Zanzo. He had become more distracted at the magazine, and unlike before, I didn't always "remember" to cover for him. The gossip in the office was that he was scoping out the art director job at a new downtown high-gloss porn mag.

The final straw for the editor was one of those last-second disasters that somehow made its way into the magazine. Royce Royal (whose birth name, by the way, was Sherrill Wellington Pugh) had just released a country album called "Farm it Out," and yes, it was recorded at the farm he purchased in New Jersey. Royce's record label was throwing lavish advertising money at it to try and coax it up the charts. After a month of "Farm it Out" centerspread ads, the editor offered to run a complimentary, full-page, full-color ad on the back cover of our magazine. When the record label mentioned it to Royce, he told them that he thought it would be really good PR to run a "combo message" ad by incorporating the new album with some sort of Salvation Army message or image. "That would really impress my old man," he told them.

Zanzo, who smelled a portfolio piece for himself, jumped all over the idea, and convinced our editor and the record label (who convinced Royce) to let him handle its creation. The concept was questionable, to say the least, but Royce loved it. It would be a photograph taken on a Greenwich Village street just outside a little restaurant that stood beside a well-known record store. Royce's "Farm it Out" posters would be prominently plastered all over the record store's windows. Next door, there would be a tattered homeless man looking sadly into the window of the restaurant as a fat-cat businessman cut into a large baked chicken. The ad would have a simple headline: "SALVATION IS AT HAND." A few sentences at the bottom of the ad would tell how you could help the homeless by donating to the Salvation Army (and by buying the new Royce Royal album). It was implied (but not actually stated) that a portion of the album's profits would go toward the charity. The record label's logo would appear at the bottom of the ad beside the Salvation Army logo.

Now, it's one thing to draw up a rough layout of an ad that would include all of these elements; it's quite another to pull it off with photography. The editor was skeptical that it could work, but unfortunately, Zanzo had already pitched it to Royce's record people and once they ran it by Royce, his excitement could not be diminished.

Sure enough, the first photo session was a disaster. Zanzo had used one of the staff photographers at the porn mag he was courting, and the photographer brought in his own idea of how the picture should look. This included the reflection of one of his magazine's centerfolds in the record store window. When Royce and the record label saw the pictures, they insisted on re-shooting with their own photographer.

Amazingly, the second photographer made it all work—the posters in the record store window showed up just enough to be able to advertise Royce's album; the homeless man came off as sympathetic, but not disgusting or dirty; the restaurant was lit from inside with warm, *come-in-from the cold* lighting, and the fat cat and his huge baked chicken was appropriately despicable.

Zanzo insisted on putting the whole ad together by himself (at this point, not only did he dislike me, he didn't trust me, either). When the color proof of the ad came back, the editor was pleasantly surprised, and Royce's record label loved it. Plus, the Salvation Army people were grateful for the publicity, and Zanzo could almost see feel and taste his advertising award. There was just one little problem; Royce was on the road and didn't see the proof until the afternoon before our magazine went to press.

Zanzo was already packing up for the day when he got the call from Royce, himself. Zanzo was expecting to hear how much Royce loved it, so what he heard next took a few seconds to sink in. Apparently, Royce had *had a dream about the ad* the night before, and an "ad angel" had told him to "Simplify, simplify, simplify." It wasn't a big deal, Royce told him, just change the headline to one word: "SALVATION."

Now, a logical person would have just pushed off the ad into the next week's issue of the magazine. Or maybe he would have made the point that "Salvation is

at Hand” defines the concept a little more succinctly than simply “Salvation.” But an egotistical person hungering for an advertising award (and who might just be a little afraid that the artist and the label might put the kibosh on the whole thing) is most likely to plow on through with reckless abandon.

Okay, so here’s the thing that every art director hates and fears: *typos*. Typos happen, even in the most carefully-proofed publications. And sometimes, the most simple sentence can have the worst mistakes. But to make matters worse, when you run text or a headline that is ALL CAPS, the typos are harder to see, because sometimes your brain-and-eye connection will try and help you out and will interpret a word or words that, in reality, say something *completely different*. And that’s why it wasn’t discovered until that Saturday afternoon when I took the subway into Manhattan to pick up a copy of *MuzicZene* magazine at a Times Square newsstand. The cover was beautiful. The colors picked up the warm, yellow orange of the late afternoon Manhattan sunshine. But, when I flipped the magazine over to the back cover ad, the one-word headline above the desperate man gazing into the little restaurant window glared like an on-coming train: “SALIVATION.”

When I got in the following Monday, Zanzo’s office had been cleaned out and there was a note on my drawing table for me to see the editor. After formally offering me the job of art director, he handed me an envelope. Inside were the details of my new salary, an overview of the job description, and an old bar napkin with the drawing of a chicken in ballpoint ink.



Big as a Buick

I stayed with the magazine for five years, until most of the staff had moved on to other ventures. I don't know what happened to Zanzo. Someone said he never got the job at the porn mag, and they theorized that it was because he had most likely made some enemies by not using the initial photo for the famous ad. Someone else said that they had heard that he ended up at *Used Car Weekly* magazine. At any rate, I'm sure he went on to torment other assistants.

I eventually found another art director job and spent my last two years in New York doing a backwards commute from Brooklyn Heights out to a small town on Long Island. After six months of being held hostage by the timetables of the Long Island Railroad, I appealed to my dad in Tennessee to find me a car.

“Not really a good, or should I say, *great* car,” I had told him, “The roads up here are unbelievably bad. I really just need a *disposable* car. When a car breaks down on the Brooklyn Queens Expressway or the Long Island Expressway, by the time you get off the highway and call for help and get back to the car, it’s already been trashed. It’s like mobile piranhas scour the roads. And once a car is trashed, it continues to deteriorate a little more each day until after a week or so, there’s nothing left but a burned-out shell. I need a car that, if it breaks down, I can just walk away from it. So yeah, a *disposable* car.”

That’s how I came to be driving a 22-year-old Buick. It rolled off the assembly line one bright morning when I was laboring over a fourth-grade spelling test with a thick red pencil. Now, I can’t swear to that; it may just be my pseudo-retrospective memory tricking me. But the way I remember it, Mrs. Baltic was walking slowly up and down the aisles reading the list of words and my classmates and I were dutifully spelling them.

“Chicken,” she read, and then she would pause so we could write it down in our spelling books to be turned in. Then, “nostril,” then, “anchor,” then “Buick.”

But again, in retrospect, the word may have been “tunic,” because, as I recall, I usually missed a few words on every test, and many people have assured me that the word “Buick” would not have been on a fourth-grade spelling test. “Pinto,” maybe, or even “mustang,” but neither would have been capitalized. Like I said, it’s probably just my pseudo-retrospective memory.

As for this actual flesh-and-blood, chrome-and-oil Buick, my father found it for me (20 years after the spelling test) in a Nashville used car lot. He had the brakes fixed and put a new set of tires on it, and I flew down on a Thursday, spent the night and then started the long journey back up to New York. I had to be back at work on the following Monday, so there was no time to relax.

The Buick was a big, gold, lumbering two-door, and like all of my other cars, I learned about the inconveniences of its idiosyncrasies the hard way—and right off the bat, in fact. For example, I learned not to wait until the Buick’s gas gauge was down to a quarter tank to stop for gas. The trip from Nashville through the mountains of East Tennessee and Virginia were scenic and pleasant. However, a severe

and unexpected ice storm somewhere in the mountains of West Virginia and Pennsylvania taught me that when the gas tank was just below a quarter tank, it was very easy for the gas line to freeze. That would cause the car to stop running, even on the interstate. Who knew? Fortunately, when the car started wheezing, it happened at an exit ramp that ran downhill. And, at the bottom of the exit ramp, the highway sloped downhill, and at the very bottom of the hill, there was a farmhouse's dirt driveway—much like the old dirt driveway of our old Tennessee farmhouse, only, like the highway and the exit ramp, this one ran downhill.

The Buick's engine had sputtered to a stop on the exit ramp itself, so I let gravity take me down the exit, highway, and driveway to the quaint, little Pennsylvania farm. It was freezing, and the ice had covered the car's roof, hood and trunk. Plus, it was beginning to get dark. The car rolled to a stop in front of a large barn, at which time, the big barn door slid open and the Pennsylvania counterpart to ol' Bud appeared. He was wearing what could have been taken from Bud's clothes closet. Under his feet, there scurried four or five chickens, all of which screeched to a halt upon encountering the falling sleet and beelined back into the old barn. The old farmer watched attentively as they all returned into the barn, and then swung his gaze upon me. It was getting darker by the minute, and it reminded me of a scene out of a "farmer's daughter" joke, as in "*We don't have an extra bed, but I can let you sleep in the barn...*" Or was that from a slasher movie—"*Pennsylvania Slaughterhouse*"?

Either way, this farmer didn't say *anything*; he just listened as I explained what had happened to me and the Buick on the interstate. Still silent, he led me to a rusty gas can in the corner of the barn, picked it up and led me to the side of the barn, where there stood an old '50s-era gas pump, which he started cranking by hand. He filled the gas can and opened the hood of the Buick and poured a little of the gas into the carburetor and the rest into the gas tank at the back of the car. He pointed at the ignition, so I jumped in and after a few tries, the old car coughed back to life. I offered the old farmer some money, but he waved me on and disappeared into the old barn, still without a single word. Again, just like ol' Bud, only without the words.

The gas helped me make it to a little Motel 6, where I stayed for the night. The next morning, the sun was out and the ice was gone. So I nudged the Buick up through New Jersey, over the Verazono Bridge, across Staten Island and “home” to Brooklyn Heights. However, once I arrived, I was faced with another issue; where was the Buick going to stay (*it followed me home, can I keep it?*)? There was “alternate side of the street” parking, which meant that, in the unlikely event that I did actually find a parking spot within 10 or 20 blocks from my apartment, my car could only stay there one night; it would have to be moved to the other side for the next night, and back again the night after that. The first few nights, I drove around the neighborhood for an hour—in all directions—waiting on someone to leave me a warm parking space. And even when I eventually found one, I was constantly worried about the Buick being vandalized. That was because, instead of blending in with the other cars in the neighborhood, it stood out like a sore antennae; apparently, cars can’t survive that long on New York City streets, and a 20-year-old specimen shone like a museum on wheels. The only solution was to find a garage in which to rent space, but that process was a lot like finding a kindergarten for your 4-year-old, and almost as expensive. I had to meet with the garage manager and bring the Buick to discuss its future and to convince him that it could get along with the other cars.

As it turned out, when all of the exhaust cleared, the old Buick played nicely with the other cars and actually did quite well on the mean streets and expressways of the city. Sure, there were minor problems, but all-in-all, it took the cold winters and the giant potholes in stride. However, as the old car adjusted to the urban lifestyle, I began to de-adjust to it; I was starting to develop a chronic bad attitude. I was tired of the cold. I was tired of the commute. I was tired of competing for everything—sidewalk space, restaurant booths, seats on the subway, and, well, breathing room. I suppose I was getting tired of being chased by the metaphorical farmyard dogs.



The Frozen Chicken Tips the Scales

Don't get me wrong—I loved New York, at least long enough to stay for most of my twenties and into my early thirties. The city is a big glittering jewel just waiting to be grasped and worn around your neck like a brilliant pendant. You just had to be able to recognize when it turned into a noose. There was a time in my life there in the city when the elbowing and pushing and rude people actually amused me and encouraged me to keep moving, which I was more than happy to do.

In the beginning, I felt like time was my friend and ally. But eventually, the novelty of the briskness and manic pace of the city started wearing off. Maybe it was because I was becoming brisk and manic, myself. Maybe it was because I was rapidly approaching middle age. Or maybe it was because New York had finally become my reality—not just a place I was visiting for a few months or a year or two. The tipping point came one after-

noon in the food market around the corner from where I lived in Brooklyn Heights. I was in the *Ten Items or Less* line, waiting behind a man who looked to be in his seventies.

The large woman in front of him was nonchalantly pulling out her twentieth item, a frozen chicken, and the elderly man turned to me with a sad smile and sighed, “I don’t understand why they bother putting up a sign up like that if they’re not going to enforce it.” He wasn’t really complaining; he was just expressing some quiet frustration.

However, the market manager just happened to be walking by when the old man uttered these words, and he stopped in his tracks, as if he had been waiting for someone to say something to that effect, and now that it had indeed been uttered, his life had finally taken on meaning. “What did you say?” he demanded. He was a short and stocky man with a perpetually angry expression, and he was wearing a white apron and matching white cap with an anchor on the front and script on the back that said, “*The Way All Frozen Foods Should Be.*”

The old man met his gaze and said, “I was just saying that they really shouldn’t put up a sign like that if they’re not going to enforce it.”

The manager leaned in close and said, “Look, Pops, by saying ‘they’ you’re meaning ‘me,’ and in the time it takes for you to complain, we’ll already have you and your Geritol checked out. So, if you can’t stomach our store policy, you can take your chump-change business elsewhere. Maybe you should consider *Geezers ‘R’ Us.*”

The old man just shook his head and smiled at the red-faced manager and waited to pay. I was angered by the manager and embarrassed for the old guy. But when he leaned over to pay for his items, it was only then that I saw the small “101st Airborne Division Screaming Eagles” patch and the D-Day pin on his jacket. I suppose I should have just dropped what I was buying and walked out, but I guess I was too taken aback at the manager’s attitude. And besides, I told myself, why should I get involved? Still, I did a slow burn. I found it pretty infuriating that some sawed-off blowhard of a grocery store manager could be so insulting to someone who landed in Normandy with half the German army lobbing every

scrap of metal they could dig up to shoot, launch or throw at him. The twentieth-item frozen chicken seemed pretty ridiculous by comparison. But the old man just shrugged with indifference and pocketed his change as he clutched his grocery bag. As a parting shot, he smiled at the scowling manager as the automatic doors whooshed open to allow his exit. I guess he figured that he had put his life on the line in the big war so that snotty little men could insult him in his old age.

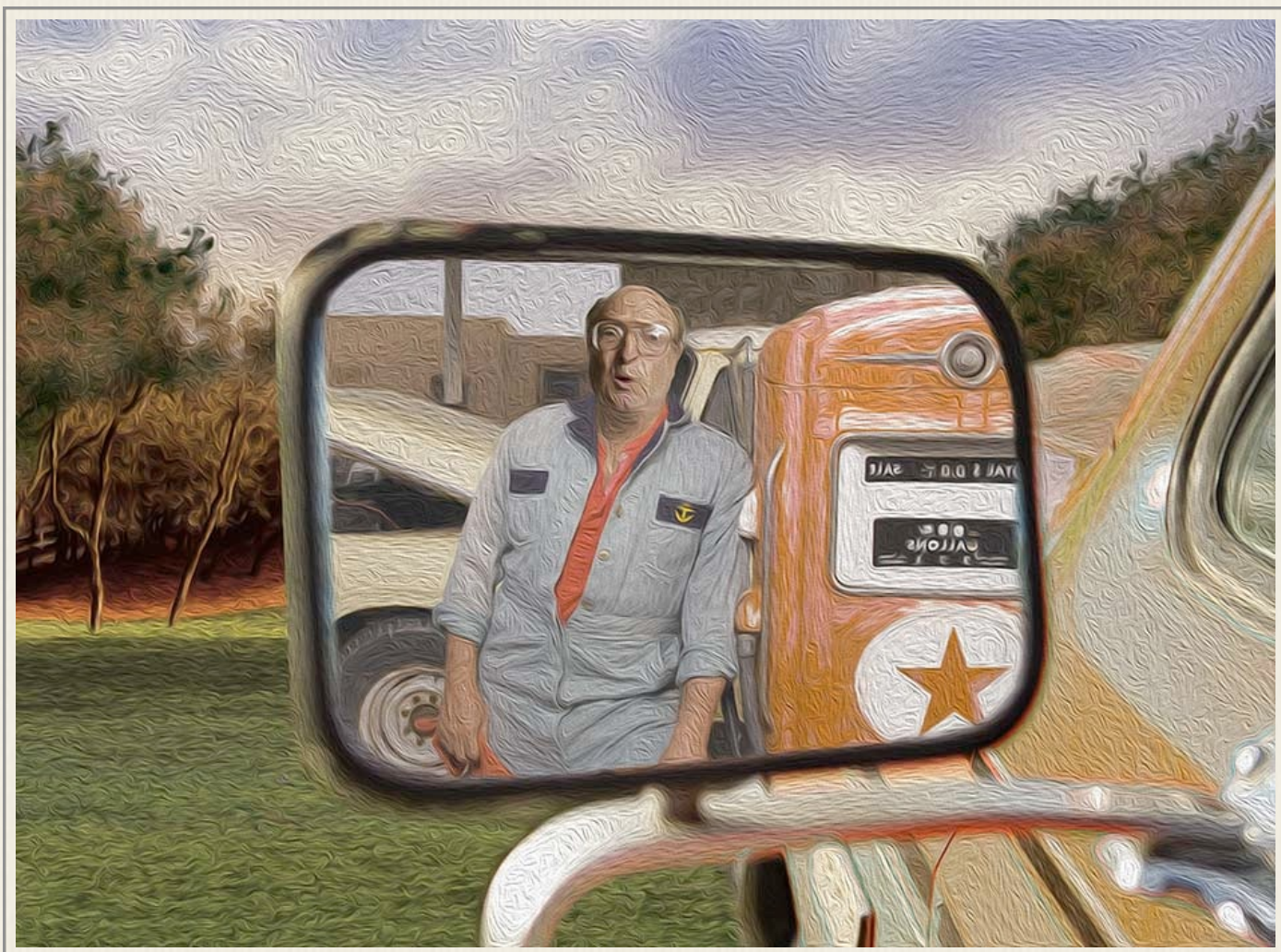


A few days later, I was driving home late, and I saw the same manager with the same silly white cap crossing in front of me at the intersection in front of his market. Actually, he was jaywalking against the light. “*What? He’s manager of the entire street, too?!?*” I said to myself. Without thinking, I jammed my foot down on the old Buick’s accelerator and aimed the car toward the obnoxious little man. He initially froze like a deer in the headlights, but managed to jump frantically out of the way at the very last second, his face’s angry expression turning to shock and terror.

“*Now, why on earth did I do that?*” I wondered, as I turned the corner heading back to the garage. I have to believe that I would have veered off at the last second if he hadn’t gotten out of the way; on the other hand, I have to say that I was amused at the dance he did to dodge the Buick. I also chuckled at the idea of putting a little grocery store manager icon on my fender; that would, of course, have been in honor of the World War II vet from the check-out line who had probably seen his share of little Nazi flags stuck on the American fighter planes that escorted him and his comrades over Normandy.

As I pulled into the big garage, my mood darkened. It was suddenly clear that I had to get out of New York before I killed somebody—or somebody killed me. Who knows—maybe I would have even found a gentle, chicken-herding Brooklyn Heights German Shepherd that I could attack—one that would grab me by the neck and shake the life out of me. All I knew was that I had managed to survive for seven years in the city, but I was beginning to see the escape window and garage door start to close.

So, the following week after my attempted flattening of the market manager, I gave notice at my job. After I had worked my final two weeks, I said my goodbyes to all my friends that had shared my New York days with me. It was bittersweet, and I have to say that I did question my decision to leave the city quite a few times during those last few weeks. However, if there was one thing the legacy of the chicken taught me, it was to quit while I was ahead.



Epilogue

“Okay, but it’s a one-way offer,” my father said over the phone when I asked if he could fly up to New York to help get me moved out of the city. “You ain’t getting any help from me if you change your mind and want to go back.”

True to his word, he flew into LaGuardia that hot summer night in June, and I picked him up in the Buick he had found for me down in Tennessee a few years earlier. We outfitted the old car with an industrial-strength trailer hitch and rented a one-way U-Haul trailer that we thought it could handle. We then parked it in front of my place, and packed it to the gills in one non-stop, six-hour shift. We junked most of the furniture, keeping only my guitars and banjo, my old bed and dresser, the pieces of my stereo that still worked, 1127 of my record albums, 11 crates of clothes, and a single cigar box.

The Buick did great on its last trek over the Brooklyn Bridge, but it bottomed out on the bricks of Canal Street, and by the time we cleared the Holland Tunnel, the muffler was bouncing off the road like a steel drum, throwing sparks in all directions, until we set it free in the abandoned Garden State Real Estate parking lot in New Jersey.

“At least it won’t be sleeting in Pennsylvania,” I laughed, but the joke—and the *torrential rain*—was on us. Once we hit the Pennsylvania line, the heavens opened up and we could only see a few feet in front of the Buick’s hood. To make matters worse, one of the wipers flew off in the deluge. Plus, the Pennsylvania Turnpike was under construction and had been narrowed to the width of a good-sized sidewalk for a dismal 70 or 80 miles. (For a year or so afterwards, I had nightmares about throwing continuous gutter balls in some haunted Pennsylvania bowling alley after driving that particular stretch of highway.) The other windshield wiper struggled like a champ and made it as far as the north end of the Shenandoah Valley, where the sunrise lit up the rainclouds and somehow made the rain stop. The thermostat made it as far as the East Tennessee Texaco station just outside of Knoxville.

“We’re losing pieces of the dad-blamed car, little by little,” my dad complained to the mechanic as we rolled into the station.

And so, while I listened to the tales of blindness from the local sage in the Texaco’s waiting room, my father and the mechanic strapped a new thermostat onto the old Buick. Checking the map as we idled in the station’s lot, he noted again that Ol’ Bud’s farmhouse was just an hour out of the way, but we were both exhausted and anxious to get back on the road to Nashville.

“I’m sure Hawkins would love to see us,” I said, “But maybe next time. I’ll be back up here in a week or two.”

“As long as you stay in Tennessee and don’t continue on up the road,” my father said as I took the wheel and pulled the freshly-thermostatted Buick back up onto the interstate. By then, it was late in the afternoon, and the road was starting to become crowded with Knoxville nine-to-fivers on their way home from work.

“By the way, speaking of Hawkins and the chicken, is that crazy bird even still there?”

“It’s funny you asked,” I said, “It’s kind of long story.”

“Long story, meaning it’ll take us up through Crossville, or long story meaning it’ll take us all the way home?” my father asked.

“I guess it depends on what version you want, how much detail, and how fast I tell it—*or drive*—and where I begin,” I said, glancing into the rearview mirror. In the mirror, I saw the U-Haul behind the car, bumping up and down and rocking back and forth. The picture of it made me smile—it was filled with all my worldly belongings, bless my heart. I also knew that somewhere buried underneath the furniture, clothes and guitars was an ancient cigar box with some yellowed magazine clippings, along with a old bar napkin, tattooed with a rough, ballpoint pen drawing of the Zanzo chicken.

Behind that, I could still see the little thrice-blinded man in his pigeon-gray jumpsuit. He was in front of the quickly-shrinking-into-the-distance Texaco, crawling on his hands and knees, as if he were looking for a tails-up quarter, shattered pieces of a projector bulb, or for that matter, a tiny hole to China.

I began telling my dad the revised final chapters of the chicken tale, but my immediate attention was directed straight ahead, as I squinted at the big, yellow-orange, late afternoon Tennessee sun broadcasting through the windshield. It gleamed off the hood of the old Buick like a golden eye and transformed the interstate into an electric, day-glo ribbon, unwinding slowly through the East Tennessee hills and rolling westward to Nashville and beyond.



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